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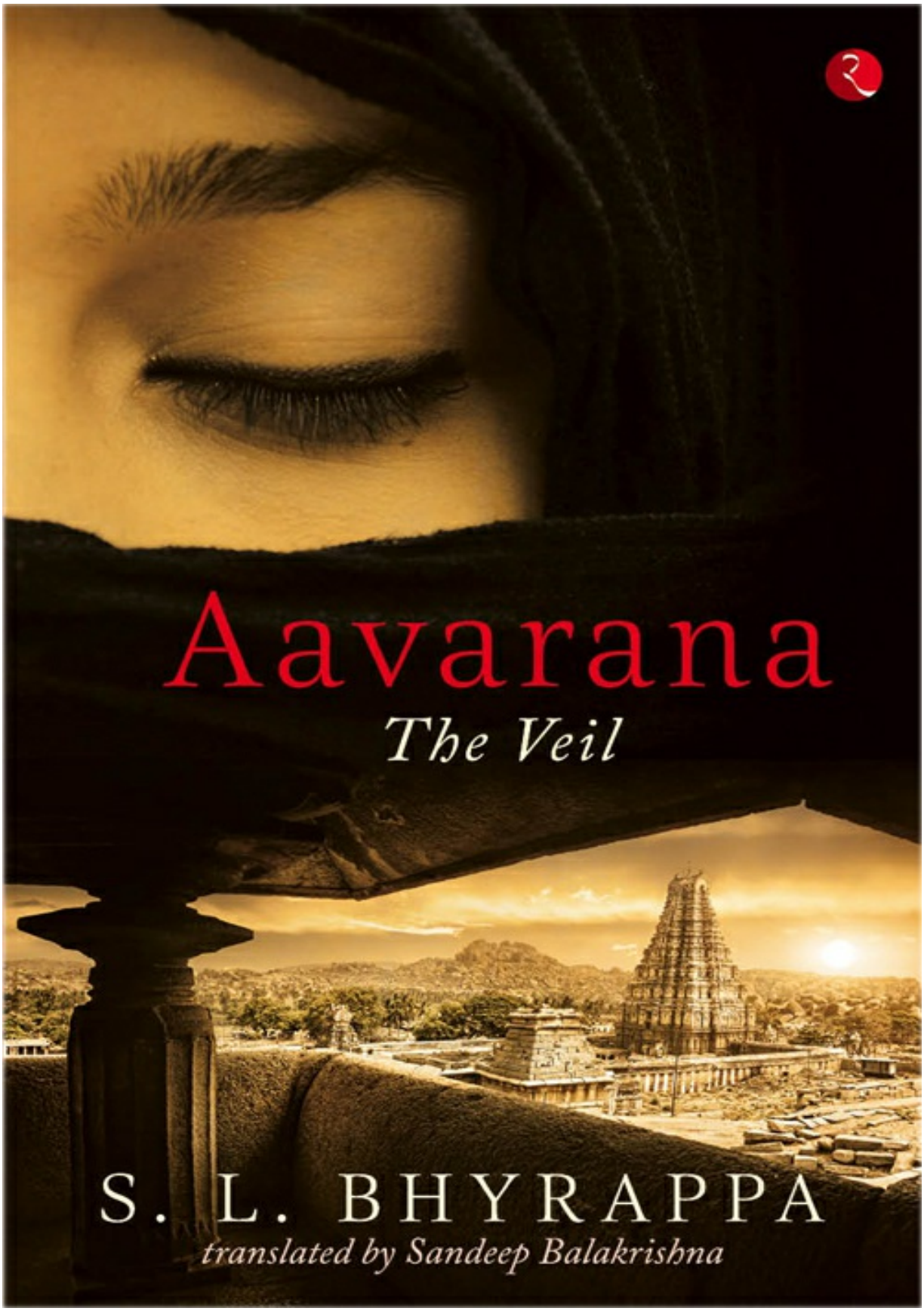
Aavarana
The Veil
S. L. BHYRAPPA
translated by Sandeep Balakrishna

AAVARANA

Dr S.L. Bhyrappa is widely regarded as the greatest living novelist in Kannada. In a literary career spanning over fifty years he has authored twenty-two novels, which have been translated into most of the major Indian languages, including Urdu. His works have run into several reprints and have been the subject of numerous scholarly studies, as well as heated public debates. Of his books, *Daatu* won the Sahitya Akademi award while *Mandra* won him the prestigious Saraswati Samman. He lives in Mysore.

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PREFACE

The act of concealing truth is known as ‘aavarana’, and that of projecting untruth is called ‘vikshepa’. When these occur at the level of an individual, it is known as ‘avidya’ and when they occur at the level of a group or the world, it is known as ‘maya’. These concepts, propounded by the Vedantins, have found agreement even with Buddhist philosophers.

Indian philosophical schools have the distinction of elucidating the problem of truth and untruth by elevating it to the level of philosophy. One problem, however, has bothered me ever since I came of age. This had troubled me at a personal level when I wrote *Saakshi* (*The Witness*) a few years ago. The novel ends with the question, ‘Lord, what’s the root of untruth? Can it never be destroyed?’ Although this question marked the end of *Saakshi* as a novel, it didn’t help assuage either my intuition or intellect. However, after I finished writing *Aavarana*, I felt—and continue to feel—that this same problem of truth and untruth has assumed both social and national dimensions.

We cannot truly comprehend our own selves or the history of our nation or, indeed, the history of the entire world, unless we unshackle ourselves from the bonds of false knowledge, desire and action, and elevate the intellect to a state of detached observation.

~

I have no claim to originality as far the historical element in this novel is concerned. Every detail and behaviour of the characters described is backed by evidence and is an organ of the book without violating the boundaries of artistic freedom. Both creative writers and discerning readers will notice this aspect as the technique of the novel unfolds. The character who writes a novel within this novel provides the necessary historical evidence as a prerequisite to her writing. My only claim to originality is the form that I have given to it. If any literary merit has ensued in the backdrop of historical

truth, I consider this novel to be a successful work of literature.

Anybody who embarks upon writing a historical work essentially needs to conduct concrete research to support even the tiniest detail. The author's responsibility is towards the historical truth of the subject on which his/her work is based. When truth and beauty are put on a scale, the writer's fidelity must invariably be in favour of the truth. An author doesn't have the moral right to violate truth and take refuge in the claim that he/she is only a creative artist.

The reader, too, shares equal responsibility with the author in the quest for truth. He or she must comprehend the characters and situations in the light of objective truth—both factual and artistic. This sort of mental framework helps to actually savour the experience of reading a literary work, rather than getting agitated by reading it with personal prejudices in mind. We are not responsible for the mistakes committed by our previous generations. However, if we equate ourselves with them and regard ourselves as their heirs, we must then be ready to also share the responsibility for their mistakes. We won't attain maturity unless we cultivate the wisdom to discriminate which deeds of our ancestors we need to reject and which achievements we need to take inspiration from. If learning lessons from history is a mark of enlightenment, so is breaking free from it. This applies equally to every religion, caste, creed and group.

—S.L. Bhyrappa

1

The cool evening breeze gently blew over Razia's hair, fanning the strands in a caress as she sat looking out of the window. It wafted inside the room on the top floor of the government guest house that overlooked the Tungabhadra River and soothed her limbs, tired from the relentless, all-day wandering around Hampi's ruins. 'Should I order tea?' Amir's question was lost on her. He waited, unsure, when she didn't respond. Perhaps the breeze had drowned his voice, or she was just in one of her moods. And it wasn't the first time. He was familiar with her sudden, inexplicable silences. She was, like him, an artist, entitled to her quirks. But now the sight of the river undulating to the caress of the sundown breeze was markedly romantic. He had to talk. 'Do you have any idea how beautiful your hair looks, tinged by this twilight? You should have dyed it. The glow would be even lovelier!' he said, his voice soft with love. She did not reply. The dye remark wasn't new. On several occasions in the past she had countered it with 'I'm ready to dye my hair just the way you like it, but you need to dye your beard too.' He had briefly considered it. A jet-black maulana beard would have posed no problem but his was the Marxist-intellectual variety, which needed weekly trimming at the hands of an expert. The hairstylist would anyway shear the dyed portion. On a man, white hair was a sign of attractiveness and accomplishment, even wisdom, but on women, it only meant old age. But she just didn't get his reasoning, and instead spoke about equal rights for men and women. Well, it was pointless to add anything further and risk raking up that old argument again.

The waiter who brought tea and biscuits awaited their order for dinner. She mumbled that she would be okay with whatever Amir ordered and stood up, teacup in hand, returning to the window, once again lost in her thoughts. This was completely unlike her. Whenever they went out, Razia typically took charge of the menu, carefully selecting the items to order. Amir spoke to the waiter, 'Chicken pulao if you have it, chicken biryani, if you don't.'

‘Non-vegetarian isn’t available today, sir. We don’t have any other guests here. But I’ll make a great vegetarian meal, sir—chapati and potato curry to go with it, some rice, sambhar and curds.’

Amir was livid, ‘I’ve been living on vegetarian nonsense since morning! How hard is it for you to understand when I tell you that I need non-vegetarian at least once a day? How am I supposed to function normally without some meat in my stomach? Do you want me to complain to your bosses about the quality of food here? We’re guests of the government!’

The waiter, who was clearly used to this kind of outburst, didn’t respond but didn’t alter his sheepish grin either. Even he knew that Amir was aware how government guest houses functioned. Amir’s anger was purely tactical, almost perfunctory, practised to keep such waiters in their place. Amir relented, ‘Fine. But I insist on having omelettes for breakfast tomorrow!’

‘Sure, sir! I’ll order eggs from Hospet right away,’ the waiter replied and left.

Suddenly Amir became aware of the sweat sticking to his body from the day’s sojourn. A little later, he was under the shower, enjoying the water cascading down his body. When he came out, Razia still hadn’t budged from the window. He donned his neatly-ironed trousers and, saying, ‘I’m going for a walk to the dam. I’ll be back in half an hour,’ he left.

He walked slowly, inhaling the cool air. It felt good. The entire region except this dam was a bloody furnace, he thought. Hampi especially was jahannam, a blazing hell. Why did they choose this as their capital? Because it was safe? Hakka and Bukka, the founders of the Vijayanagar Empire, were goatherds from Hampi. Was it because they were intimately familiar with the place? This explanation seemed more plausible. Besides, thinking about such minor details was Razia’s job. She was in charge of the research, script and narration.

But why was she so intensely moody ever since they had returned to the guest house in the evening? Actually, it had begun sometime in the afternoon. Now it began to nag him. Whatever their eccentricities, artists couldn’t neglect their work indefinitely, citing mood as an excuse. He recalled that they had fought over this point several times in the past. Film-making was a serious art—and a costly business—not to be left at the mercy of one’s mood and whims. That would inevitably end in the producer’s suicide. Luckily, Razia had almost no part in the shooting. Even then, as Amir recalled rather petulantly, her record of delivering the script within the deadline was

consistently poor. He wondered if she would adhere to her unpunctuality for the Hampi project as well. It worried him. The Hampi project reported directly to the central government's Heritage Department. It was ambitious in intent, massive in its scope and urgent in its need for execution. The initiative involved making documentaries on all the major heritage sites in India. He had been entrusted with Hampi. That sparked an important recollection in Amir's mind—the government's unwritten diktat about how the documentaries must be filmed: stills of temple ruins, broken idols and damaged artefacts must be shown in a softer light in order to avoid arousing anti-Muslim sentiments in the viewers.

This memory sparked yet another: the government's rationale behind this diktat. Of late, Hindu fundamentalism had increased in intensity. It was true, he thought, no tyranny is worse than the tyranny of the majority. If the majority eventually turned completely fundamentalist, there was no hope for the nation to remain united. About a month back, the frightening evidence of increase in Hindu fanaticism had revealed itself. Exactly a month and eight days ago. The day of horror. The hour when the blanket of security that minorities had felt since Independence was shattered. That moment when the entire nation had shivered in fear. The singular incident that had ravaged the country's reputation on the international stage. Amir reflected on that for a moment—*I haven't been to Ayodhya but I know how it is there. The place is completely cordoned off to everybody, with round-the-clock police protection and patrolling. A month and eight days and everything changed. What else did they expect after demolishing the Babri Masjid, a mosque sacred to India's minorities?* But mere policing—or force—would not prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future. It looked like the government had realized that inculcating tolerance for different religions in the hearts of citizens was the urgent need of the day. The documentaries on heritage sites were part of its larger objective of propagating a series of foundational programmes to instil and foster societal and religious tolerance. Equally, the other immediate need was to reassure the minorities that they were safe from the fundamentalism of the majority. The ruling party, the secularists and the Left parties were united in their support for all measures initiated to achieve this goal—education, media propaganda and greater representation and visibility for minorities in all fields. More importantly, severely punishing anybody who spoke negatively about them.

That raised a doubt in his mind—*did they give me this project only*

because I'm from the minority community or because I'm really a talented film-maker? Whatever their opinion, he reasoned, *I know I'm good…and… well, they know it as well. This is not a project an inferior film-maker can handle. I wouldn't have accepted it if it wasn't this challenging.*

But the bigger challenge was the long-term promise. The government had already hinted at the possibility that he could bag the remaining projects if he delivered Hampi in time and according to their expectations. That meant revenues in tens of millions. His thoughts reverted to Hampi, a place he had visited many times in the past. Only this time he had to look at it from a different perspective. But Razia was his perspective-provider, he reflected happily. *She would read expert literature, make notes, prepare the script and the narration for the voice-over. As director, I will instruct the still photographer to take pictures, collate them according to the script and shoot the actual documentary.*

The next step wasn't really mandatory, but he wanted Razia to be present at the shooting. Her input had proven valuable 90 per cent of the time, her mood notwithstanding. And then he suddenly realized that she was not merely moody today. She seemed depressed, almost melancholic… Maybe she was just worn out. The heat in Hampi wasn't ordinary. It struck in waves from all directions, emanating with great intensity from massive boulders.

They had hired a car, which they didn't use much because Razia preferred to see the ruins by foot. She stopped at every ruin and examined it in minute detail. This meant standing at the same place for extended periods, altering positions—bending, crouching and sitting on one's toes—for closer examination. Done over three consecutive days, it resulted in a strain that a fifty-four-year-old woman couldn't easily endure… *But our ages are the same, and I feel quite okay*. He pondered—*I shower fastidiously, and take long walks every day*. He smiled conceitedly. *Whatever the noise over gender equality, nobody can really alter the fundamentals: a woman is always the weaker one, physically and intellectually. God's creation cannot be false.*

Razia seemed to have turned inwards, withdrawn even, during dinner. Later in bed, he said, 'I guess we have covered everything here. Had we known we would finish today, we could have caught tonight's train to Bangalore. But in a way it's good. We have the whole day to relax tomorrow and board the train at night. You anyway have more research work on your hands, or you can start working on the outline of the narration. Can you prepare the narration from memory? If you need more material, we can hire a

good local guide to give us the relevant historical information for each item we show.'

When she didn't respond he grew suspicious: was she merely in an off-mood or angry with him? He couldn't recall from the day's events what he could possibly have done to upset her. And then, he quickly reasoned, there was really no logical explanation for women's quirks. Her latest bout of unresponsiveness left nothing for him to say, and any further attempt to make conversation would only wound his self-respect. Neither was this the first instance where his pride risked injury at her hands in their long years of marriage. But he had borne them all with grace, accepting ego clashes as an inseparable part of married life.

He shifted his focus to the cool wind drifting inside the room through the open windows and the sound of the river waves ceaselessly breaking over the wall of the dam. He thought of standing by the window to watch the river flow, but realized it would be a futile attempt. It was impossible to see anything in the dark. Razia finally broke the silence and spoke at last. 'It's not that easy to write the script and narration for a subject like this. We need to provide the accurate historical backdrop for each image and artefact that we show the audience. Pictures and words should say the same story. We can't fool the audience by showing them something and telling them that it's something else…you can't make the camera tell a lie. But if you think this'll prove uncomfortable, let's not show unpleasant historical truths; in which case, it's meaningless to even shoot the Hampi documentary, isn't it?'

He was relieved. 'Well said! And I agree! But give me examples of what you mean. An artist is definitely much better equipped than most people to overcome artificial notions of embarrassment and shame and has no fear of showing the truth to the world!'

She said, 'Remember the idol of Ugra Narasimha? In its current mutilated form, it is difficult to distinguish whether it really is Ugra Narasimha or Lakshmi Narasimha. Whatever, but it's truly exemplary for its workmanship, sense of proportion, balance, intricacy and sheer artistry! Enough to transport you to a higher plane just by looking at it! But who broke the idol's arms and legs? And who demolished the Vijaya Vittala temple? Originally, the Narasimha idol was inside a temple complex of the same size as Vijaya Vittala. Piles of large wooden logs were stuffed inside the temple and they were set afire. The fire gradually burned the hard stone until it cracked. And then the arms and legs of the Narasimha idol were broken with large iron

crowbars. Most temples here received similar treatment. For instance, even an untrained eye can easily detect that the Vijaya Vittala temple suffered the same two-phased demolition, because the burnt remains of the stones of these destroyed temples are still visible there, around the site. If we show all this, we also need to tell the audience the truth of who destroyed these temples and why—if we're serious about the documentary's credibility. If we aren't, our narration would be dishonest.'

'Definitely, definitely! The audience needs to know the true history of the medieval feudal society and the forces of feudalism that led to the destruction of Hampi!' Amir spoke excitedly and launched into a lecture. 'I have my own insight on this, something I'm sure our intellectuals would agree with. The Vijayanagar Empire was incomparably the wealthiest empire in its time, where gold, diamonds, pearls and gems were measured in Ballas. While this definitely shows a highly refined form of centralized economy, we must not be blind to the other, darker reality: how could it manage to accumulate such staggering wealth? In a feudal society, this was possible only by brutally exploiting the working classes. Rebellion naturally simmered within the working classes. They secretly plotted intrigue with Vijayanagar's adversaries, and invited them to attack Vijayanagar. In the battle, they sided with the enemy and finally vanquished the unjust capitalistic rule that had oppressed them for so long. But they didn't stop there. Centuries' worth of pent-up rage at not getting their rightful share of the society's wealth released itself in the form of large-scale destruction of temples and idols, the physical symbols of their erstwhile rulers' religious beliefs. What do you think of this interpretation? I'm sure our intellectuals would approve.'

She said nothing. Her silence was enough to puncture the feverish excitement he felt at unearthing a revolutionary interpretation. She spoke after several minutes. 'Don't you realize how incredible your interpretation sounds? You're trying to link two non-linkable historical phenomena. The class rebellion that you speak of occurred after the industrial revolution, while the destruction of the Vijayanagar Empire occurred in a purely agrarian society. More importantly, the sculptors—they fall within your "working classes"—who built these temples and the workmen who carved the fine idols didn't merely practise a profession to earn a living. Their profession was not divorced from their religion; temple-building was an expression of their devotion to a faith they deeply revered. It is unthinkable that these people would actually embark on such a systematic, elaborate temple

destruction, and burn and smash the idols of their own gods with hammers and crowbars. Compare them to the artisans who built the Taj Mahal. They used their skills just as a means to earn a living. It's perfectly logical for a victorious king to cart away the wealth of his trounced rival. But what I'm unable to understand is the mentality which motivates a victorious king to destroy the temples, idols and other symbols of the defeated enemy's religion.'

Amir was now silent. She continued, 'I can still recall something from my childhood; I think I was about ten. My village, Narasapura, and the neighbouring village, Kalenahalli, were bound by hatred. Because my village was located at a higher altitude, all the rainwater from the hill surrounding it would flow down and collect in the lake in our village. But because Kalenahalli was located much lower, it received just a trickle and its reservoir was always empty. Its fields were poorly irrigated and its crops withered because there was almost no groundwater, and there was never enough water in their wells. The Kalenahalli reservoir filled up only when a particularly severe rain breached the dam of our reservoir, and it overflowed into theirs. That year, the whole region, including Narasapura, suffered a bad drought. All water sources had dried up. But the Kalenahalli people concluded that we had purposely refused to give them water. One night, a bunch of young men from that village dug up the small outlet coming out of our reservoir and detonated a massive quantity of dynamite. The embankment was shattered and the reservoir was empty in no time. The next morning when our folks realized what had happened, they declared war on Kalenahalli. All of Narasapura poured into Kalenahalli armed with huge wooden clubs and sticks, and a major fight ensued. Both sides were wounded. Kalenahalli had to eventually admit defeat because we thoroughly outnumbered them. The fight culminated with the death of two people and the wounded were left to nurse their injuries. I was an eyewitness to the battle. But on their way back home, my victorious village folk stopped at the temple of Kalamma, the village deity of Kalenahalli, set down their weapons, prostrated before the temple and prayed for her blessings before resuming their journey. The Kalenahalli folks were no different. Each time they passed through Narasapura on a journey to some other place, they offered prayers to our village deity—Gadde Kempamma—sat for sometime in the temple courtyard and then moved on. This time-honoured tradition applied to all villages in the region.' Razia paused, then said, 'There's a reason I narrated this. Groups and

factions and entire villages spilling each other's blood for economic reasons aren't uncommon even today. Despite this, they've never abandoned the practice of worshipping one another's gods and goddesses. With this background, given this experience, I find it impossible to interpret the destruction of the idols at Hampi as an episode of class rebellion.'

Amir didn't respond, although his mind had processed more than enough arguments to counter her. But they were arguments she was familiar with, ones they had passionately discussed over a period of many years. One of them had to only begin and the other would start off as well. So many years of shared intellectual stimulation! But now he felt she was slowly pulling at the strand that bound them together and moving in a different direction. Anything he said now would start a debate, he felt. Silence was the best recourse.

Razia closed her eyes and lay on her back in the darkness, unable to make out whether Amir was really asleep. There was no pattern to his breathing that she could detect. Perhaps that was because their thoughts now belonged to entirely different worlds.

But closing her eyes didn't help. Ever since she had seen it, her vision was filled with the gigantic idol of Narasimha, so horribly dismembered. She recalled how Narasimha was normally depicted in sculpture: half-human, half-lion with the haughty demon, Hiranyakashyapa, splayed across his thighs, the demon's intestines ripped open by Narasimha's claw-like fingernails. Most of this had been mutilated in Hampi's Narasimha…but she was unable to understand why this particular idol nagged her so much when Hampi's rich ruins offered numerous other broken idols more splendid than this. She thought hard. The answer finally emerged slowly from her memory, from the village she was born in. The Narasimha temple was one of the main temples of Narasapura and its idol resembled the one in Hampi. But Narasapura's Narasimha idol was not as large. This god was her family diety. Both her grandfather and father were named after this god—Narasappa Gowda and Narasimhe Gowda. But why did one mutilated idol of Narasimha rekindle these memories, which belonged twenty-eight years in the past when she had cut them off, forsaking her birthplace, her father, her gods and an entire way of life? Slowly she let herself dwell in the past. She recalled what her father had told her when she stubbornly insisted that she would marry no one but Amir.

'Your marriage with Amir doesn't concern just you or what you are doing

now. Your child, or the child or children of your child, or someone in some future generation that you both will give birth to will someday destroy our temples. It's best you understand right now that you will be directly accountable for that sin.'

'What era do you live in, Father? Do you still believe in this nonsense?' I had asked, shocked.

'The Mughal badshahs, Jahangir and Shahjahan, were both sons of Hindu queens. Yet, both of them destroyed Hindu temples when they ascended the throne. But we can't really blame them because their religion ordains them to destroy temples and idols—Jahangir and Shahjahan were merely adhering to its tenets, which remain unchanged till date. But you're in love. Your love and the excitement of youth blind you to this, you won't understand this now.'

Father had never spoken this harshly before. A staunch, chakra-spinning Gandhian; like Mahatama Gandhi himself, he believed that chakra-spinning was a penance. Every morning he awoke early and spun the chakra for two hours with devoted focus—spinning was merely symbolic, it was really a kind of meditation and he believed that its goal was to remove impurities of the mind and eliminate negative passions such as anger and hatred, and achieve a state where one could love everybody equally. I was only three when Mother died and Father was left a widower at thirty-three. At some point in his youth, Father had vowed to remain celibate so that he could fully dedicate his life to serve the rural masses, according to the path laid down by Mahatma Gandhi. However, the priest of the Narasimha temple, Shesha Sastri, older to him by four years, had convinced him otherwise. 'Serving poor people is very noble. However, you also need to fulfil your duties as a householder—get married and offer meals to the needy every day in your own home, apart from serving the society. Beget at least two children to fulfil the debt that you owe your ancestors. Get married.'

The same Shesha Sastri had also tried to dissuade me from marrying Amir by quoting from the Bhagavad Gita about the importance of doing one's duty. Frantic with worry, I had rushed to Bangalore to seek clarification. 'Amir, will our children destroy temples?' His response was instant and it convinced me, 'Nonsense! This is a standard line quoted by communalists to blacken the name of Muslims and Islam. At best, it is fiction. I'm actually surprised you even believed it!' This was enough. When you are in love, one word of the beloved outweighs the conclusion of thousands of

years of research. Father was wrong, of course. People of his generation didn't understand what true love stood for. Their world was vested in meaningless worship and antiquated ideas of duty. Love was the only reality. Father's ideas of religion were bogus. Amir's word had the finality that Father's didn't have. He demolished my doubts with just one confident line. His confidence had won me over…right from when we met each other as students studying together at the Pune film institute. We became close when we learned that we were both from Karnataka, and began to share anecdotes about Bangalore with each other. We spent our evenings sitting atop Fergusson Hill watching the sunset as young college couples snuggled behind the large boulders. It didn't take long for tender feelings to surface. We sang romantic Hindi film songs to each other, whispered poetry and swore everlasting love, the kind that shattered barriers of religion, family and society.

Amir was such a passionate pleader! And I finally submitted to his worshipful entreaties. On Sundays and holidays, we made love in nameless lodges in Pune. He refused to let me pay the bill on every occasion. What did I care, when my sole focus back then was on looking forward to the next opportunity of savouring his intoxicating proximity, the thrill of being in his arms? And how could I even remotely dream that there existed this abyss-like difference between our respective religions? With time, this difference became a reality that hardened year after year. Back then, I truly believed that I was progressive; I had risen above self-deluding and man-made bonds like religion and caste and creed. But why was I so fiercely adamant on marrying Amir? Thirty years ago. Ah! In spite of all my progressiveness, I couldn't let go of some deeply-held convictions—I couldn't possibly marry anyone but the man I had given my virginity to. I'd have probably yielded to Father's will but for this one compelling reason.

Besides, Father had offered a conciliation of sorts: 'If he truly loves you with the intensity that you say he does, let him become a Hindu and change his name. You will have my blessings. I will officiate the marriage according to traditional Hindu rites.' When I told Amir this, he didn't hesitate a second: 'That simply means you've still not freed yourself from the artificial distinctions of religion.' I shot back just as quickly: 'If we can't marry without me converting to Islam, doesn't your own logic apply to you?' He was speechless. I pressed him. 'Well…umm…but isn't it the custom for the bride to convert to the groom's religion?' he responded weakly. 'In that case,

can you tell me why even a Hindu man should compulsorily convert to Islam if he wants to marry the Muslim girl he loves?' I countered. 'All right, since you insist. My religion doesn't tolerate either the man or the girl to leave Islam. If they even try, they are killed. And it's not just that. They also kill the person responsible for providing such a motivation. Here's the thing: I love you and I can't imagine leading the rest of my life without you. As far as I'm concerned, we're already a couple…bound by eternal love. I don't believe in religion, any religion. And I know even you don't. We'll remain bonded with nothing but love. But I'm still unable to understand why you're confused—especially with all your conviction in Progressive ideas. Listen carefully: your conversion is merely circumstantial and strategic. It's just a change of name. Remember, our marriage is also an effort at achieving a larger purpose—to build a society shorn of religion, the opium of the masses. That day is not too far. But till then, we need this strategy.'

Years of intimate acquaintance with his breathing told her that Amir was fully asleep now. She got up noiselessly and went to the lounge, closing the bedroom door behind her. She pulled the recliner towards the large window and sat looking outside the window. The unceasing sound of the river's waves was all that she could sense in the moonless night.

I became pregnant six months after my nikah to Amir after converting to Islam. The tug that slowly began in my heart only intensified as my pregnancy advanced. I had to go to Father's home, fully aware that Mother wasn't alive. I had to go despite knowing that he probably wouldn't be at home, busy as he was shuttling between villages on his tireless social service sojourns. The longing to return to my roots, to at least visit the home I was born in and grew up in tormented me. But I could do little. Father's decisive, severing words did nothing to lessen this torment: 'You're no longer my daughter. You mean nothing to me from now on. I disown you, not just until I'm alive but forever.' He was a man of strong convictions, worthy of emulation. He insisted on the need to live a humble life and conquer anger under any circumstance. He was wanted by everybody—he solved the most violent village disputes and ensured that the warring parties settled their problems and parted as brothers. He bridged caste differences and helped remove untouchability through patient discourse and methods that touched people's hearts and made them see reason in his words. It was his efforts, not

the fear of the law or government, that led restaurants, temples and community wells to allow entry to Harijans. It was the sheer moral force of his personality that changed people's hearts. I couldn't even dream that this person was capable of such filial ruthlessness…and for what? Because I was about to convert to Islam? Because somebody, somewhere in the deep recesses of history had destroyed a few temples? Was that reason enough for him to kill his love for his own daughter?

I had on numerous occasions considered writing a letter to evoke his sympathy—'I'm pregnant, Father. I feel like seeing you. I want to become your little child once again.' Alternatively, I thought of taking the next bus to Narasapura and just going directly to wherever he was. I was sure his heart would soften when he saw my full-blown, pregnant belly. Would Mother have remained this hard-hearted if she were alive? Would she have allowed Father to persist in his hard-heartedness?

I didn't write the letter. For all his social service, Father was a man of stern convictions. He had but to make up his mind—nothing could make him move a millimetre. There was no way I could muster the courage to even look at his face. Or did I stay back because I had inherited some of Father's stubbornness? If he didn't want me in his life anymore, I didn't want to impose myself. I stayed back at Amir's…my house. I doubted whether Father even knew that I was pregnant. How could he when there was no one to tell him, except perhaps Professor Sastri, the only link? That man had guts. He knew what he was in for, and he had wisely gotten married to a white British woman before bringing her to meet his parents. His father Shesha Sastri and mother Acchamma were strict, orthodox Brahmins who would never approve the marriage. His mother, though, eventually accepted the new daughter-in-law. Then there was the problem of the cheap, gossipy villagers. But Professor Sastri oozed charm naturally. He would walk up to the elders and the socially important people of Narasapura who disapproved of the marriage and inflict a special kind of smile, which embarrassed them. *He visited Narasapura at least once a year, and would never fail to throw those guilt-inducing smiles. In no time, the catastrophic event of his marriage to a foreigner became a non-event. I was still pregnant when he went to the United States after accepting a visiting professorship tenure for a year… But why does a woman want to visit her mother's—in my case, father's—house when she's pregnant? Why does she desire so intensely to have the delivery in her mother's house, to show her baby to her mother first?*

Unreasonable cravings; disjointed, answerless questions. She recalled how one single thought had held her by the gut throughout her pregnancy: if Mother were alive, would she be as stubborn as Father? Had she married a Hindu, regardless of caste, would Father have fussed over her? Yes, he would have ensured that she was pampered to the hilt—the house maid, Ningavva would always be by her side, attending to even her most trivial need post-delivery. Those daydreams led her to reminiscence about her early days as a new bride in Amir's house.

I knew that my mother-in-law barely disguised her dislike for me, but it's not her fault. The aversion owed little to the fact that I was originally a Hindu; I had never been a 'Muslim' wife and daughter-in-law from the beginning. As a very devout Muslim wife and mother, my mother-in-law initially used to command me—offer namaz five times daily and do it in the room meant for it. I couldn't accept her diktat. I married Amir because our love was built and grew on a foundation of a shared conviction in the Progressive movement. I had abandoned the religion of my birth because I genuinely believed that all religions were meaningless nonsense designed by capitalists to exploit people. By that token, it was equally absurd to learn and practise the customs of another religion. Moreover, the religion of my birth had none of the restrictions that my adopted religion had—nobody really cared if I visited the Narasimha temple everyday. But the astonishing range of restrictions in Islam stifled me—the strict insistence on offering namaz five times every single day, the compulsory namaz on Fridays and the forced fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramzan. What had amazed me was how the Jamat clerics intruded into our lives. These folks actually visited our house—mostly impromptu—to check if we really followed the pure Tablighi mores of Islam! And then there was the compulsory animal sacrifice on festivals. As far as I could recall, I had never been comfortable with animal sacrifice. During childhood, I had seen sheep and goats being sacrificed to our village goddess, Kempamma, as part of the annual chariot festival. However, because of Father's efforts, plus the government ban on animal sacrifice, this practice had stopped in Narasapura eventually. But my adopted religion was different. In all these years as a Muslim, I hadn't seen anybody who could quite summon the courage to even hint that animal sacrifice was condemnable. After all, the Prophet (*Peace Be Upon Him*) *himself had sacrificed a camel when he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Being a true*

Muslim meant modelling your behaviour after the Prophet's (*Peace Be Upon Him*). *Those Muslims who didn't have access or means to afford a camel could use goats or sheep as a substitute. The seventh day of our son Nazir's birth was quite memorable: two baby goats were brought home, their bodies laid down, facing the direction of the Qibla before reciting the prayer*—inni wajjahtu waj hiyalilla di farah rassa maawaati wal arda hanifan wama anaminal mushrikin (*I have, in full reverence, turned my face towards Allah, the Creator of the earth and the sky and I swear that I do not belong to the people who worship many gods. I am most certain that my namaz, my sacrifices, my life, my death and everything that belongs to me belongs to Him who rules and protects all the worlds. It belongs to nobody else but Him alone. This has been commanded to me and I surrender to Him completely, and I am a Muslim. Oh Allah! Here, this, which you have given us, belongs to You!*) *This prayer was followed by a cry of 'Bismillahi Allahu Akbar' after which the razor-sharp sword fell on the kids' necks. The sword slowly sawed the necks almost in tune with 'Oh Allah! This akik is an offering from Nazir. Be merciful to us and accept it. Just as you accepted it from your most beloved Mohammad* (*Peace Be Upon Him*) *and from your friend Ibrahim, be pleased to accept this from us. This* (*kid's*) *blood is the solution of my child's blood, this* (*kid's*) *meat is the solution of my child's meat, and this* (*kid's*) *hair is the solution of my child's hair. Oh Allah! Be pleased to accept this!' The Dibha ritual was now officially over. It was a grand occasion. The kids' meat was then cooked with special care to prepare delicious biryani, which was distributed to relatives and neighbours.*

Lying in the convalescing room, I couldn't help but compare. Instead of killing the poor kids, they could have prepared an offering along the lines of traditional Hindu delicacies—a delicious mixture of banana, coconut and jaggery, and curd-rice served separately—and offered it to God. The idea of sacrificing an animal and giving its blood and meat as a sacred offering to a compassionate God was disconcerting at a spiritual level.

But the phone call from Professor Sastri later that night changed something in me definitively. Amir handed me the receiver. 'Congratulations Lakshmi! Oops! Are you upset that I didn't call you "Razia"? Force of habit, my dear girl. You are Razia to the whole world, but to me you'll always remain Lakshmi.' The warmth in his voice was soothing. 'I met Amir at a seminar last Sunday. He told me you have been blessed with a boy… Well, it doesn't matter whether it's a girl or a boy. I thought of calling you right then

but I had to rush to Delhi and return the same evening. And earlier this morning, the Gandhi Study Centre had invited me to inaugurate a study camp on "Gandhi and Marx: A Comparison". I met your father there. I told him he was now a grandfather. But he didn't respond. I reckon he didn't like what he heard. So I asked him, "Uncle, do you still believe in these artificial differences between religions? Humanity is greater than religion, uncle. Don't you agree?" I was stunned more at how ferociously he replied, "Narayana, stop carrying tales! Did I ask you for any information on Lakshmi? Mind your own business." Although his response shocked me, I'm not angry with him. He's elderly, he's my father's close friend and he'll always have nothing but my highest respect. But I'm on a profounder issue here—your father is but another instance of what has been happening historically. You see, we must never forget how religion makes people lose all sense of even basic humanity and erects an unbreakable wall of eternal animosity between a father and his own daughter! I don't know how many times I need to repeat this but I'll say it again: humanity has no hope of survival unless religion is wiped out. Anyway, it's been really long since I spoke to you in leisure. Finish your convalescence. We'll go out for lunch some day.'

That one conversation served to multiply the bitterness I harboured towards Father. I began to hate religion with an intensity, a kind of violence that surprised even me. I hated the religion I had discarded. If it was capable of inducing a man like my father—a strict vegetarian who had given up meat because it violated the principle of non-violence—to abandon basic humanity, it deserved nothing but contempt. In seminars, in academic papers and newspaper columns, on radio and TV, I became one of the most vocal critics of Hinduism. I wove my criticism around these themes: no other religion is as heartless as Hinduism; it has no concept of social equality given its rigid hierarchical system and its history of violence against lower castes, Dalits and widows is unparalleled among any social order in the world. I discarded Hinduism for this precise reason and converted to Islam, a faith that rests on a solid foundation of universal brotherhood and a feeling of oneness that is borderless. It shouldn't surprise us that this is the reason Islam grew, and continues to grow, in strength and numbers throughout the world. It is the earliest conception of what we today know as an egalitarian society. That such an order was envisioned 1,400 years ago is a tribute to the genius at its root.

Professor Sastri backed me at every step. He supplied me with books, notes, interpretations and insights. I was nervous initially. It wasn't easy to publicly condemn a religion, which 85 per cent of the country's population followed, and condemn it this fiercely. To my astonishment, the reception was quite the opposite. Newspapers published my photo on the front page and decorated me with titles such as 'courageous woman'. They published my seminar papers verbatim. Every progressive or revolutionary organization wanted me to inaugurate whatever programme they organized. I became a celebrity, a star of sorts. That only reaffirmed my conviction. My ex-religion was spineless: a faith whose followers reverently sipped the same water that was used in anointing the feet of their gods. Tirtha, holy water! Ha! The religion I had converted was gutsy. Nobody, nobody within it or outside it could speak a word against any of its aspects. Defence was swift and punishment, swifter. And in public. The offender was forced to apologize or pay a penalty. Or in extreme cases, punishment was meted out through the sword. This was its greatest strength: its capacity to create an atmosphere where no outsider dared to even talk about it in less than respectful terms. It was a religion of self-respect. This conviction steadily intensified with time. This is my true religion; I was merely a Hindu by an accident of birth. Over time, whenever I was home, I never missed doing the namaz five times every day. My mother-in-law began to show her love and my father-in-law was visibly happy. Yet, she hadn't fully reconciled with some of my behaviour. Like in any typical Muslim family, my house was split into two quarters—the mardana and the zenana. The zenana was in the interior of the house, pretty much closed to everybody except the family, and had a separate entrance not accessible to visitors. It was separated from the mardana, the front portion of the house, by a huge wall. If the house was large enough, the zenana resembled more of an outhouse. If a male visitor was spotted at the gate, the custom was to shout 'Ghosha! Ghosha!' The women of the house would then retire to the inner quarters—or simply conceal themselves behind a wall or door. A male member or a woman servant would talk to the visitor and accompany him to the gate to ensure that he had left the house. My mother-in-law explained this custom in detail the day I entered the house. I said nothing but refused to follow it. And there was no way I could ever convince myself to wear a burqa. If someone was at the gate—it didn't matter if it was a man or woman—I'd simply walk over and talk to the person and let him or her in. My mother-in-law hated this.

‘You are not a good Muslim woman if you do this.’

My standard response was: ‘I work in the film industry and write the script and dialogue. If I’m at the shooting location, I sometimes show the actors what to do. Can I use the “ghosha” as an excuse to not do my job?’

‘Then quit that job and stay at home. That is a man’s job. A Muslim woman should behave like a Muslim woman if she wants to be respected. Allah won’t be pleased if you continue like this.’

‘Your son agreed to my condition of continuing to work in the film industry even after marriage. You might want to confirm this with him.’ She was furious but said nothing.

However, my father-in-law tried to coax me with sweet talk.‘Don’t be upset, child. Listen to me. An educated woman loses her beauty. Because she goes out to work, the sun saps the moisture in her face and sucks out her natural beauty. Remember, only a woman’s body has the special power to stay healthy even without regular exercise. Which is why I say a woman shouldn’t step out of the house.’

‘I don’t work because I need to maintain my health or because I need to earn. I work because it satisfies my creative impulse.’ I tried to explain how this worked—drawing from what I had learned about the various ways of expressing human creativity—but it didn’t make any sense to him.

I refused to change and they refused to stop being upset until one day,

‘If you were a Muslim girl by birth, you wouldn’t have spoken to us like this—without respect, on every matter. You were attracted to Amir because he’s handsome and he’s a film director, and he has a prosperous career ahead of him. Why would you care about the customs of this house? Why would you respect our religion?’

I couldn’t stay with them in the same house after this and told Amir that the two of us needed to move out of his parents’ house.

‘No way! Please compromise a bit. Be a little tactful.’

‘Explain “tactful”,’ I demanded.

‘Wear a black gown when you’re at home. That’ll please Mother,’ he smiled.

‘Fine, but you forget that when I’m out, the press and the publicity folks click my photos and publish them. What do you recommend that I wear on those occasions? How about I wear a burqa and hide my face? That’ll make for some splendid publicity: Razia, the revolutionary–Progressive–feminist heroine! Rousing headlines! Just enough to destroy my image.’

Amir didn't know what to say. But she knew he was the darling of his parents, the only brother to his eight sisters. She couldn't imagine him arguing with his parents, let alone taking *her* side. Besides—and she realized this over time—he still retained some traces of religious orthodoxy. Another fact complicated the issue. For years, his family was held in high esteem by the community as a family that was deeply traditional.

The Tablighi, which had engaged spies everywhere to watch whether Muslim families were indeed observing all the Islamic mandates, eventually learned of my transgressions, came home and questioned Amir's parents.

'Why don't you speak to her directly? She's a disobedient daughter-in-law!' My mother-in-law's tone was acid.

The duo turned to me.

'We have information that you wear the bindi—vermilion—on your forehead quite often. Is that true?'

'I work in the film industry. If a situation demands that I wear a bindi or dress in a particular way, I can't refuse.'

'But you don't wipe it off after you return home. We also know this to be true.'

'Well, Hindu traditionalists insist that women must always wear a bindi. You insist on the opposite. Why is your religion concerned with whether I wear a bindi or not?'

The bearded watch guards of Islamic tradition were stumped for a moment and then yelled in unison,

'Why are we concerned? Because that is a kafir tradition!'

'Kafir is a term of abuse. It doesn't prove that wearing a bindi is against Islamic tradition.'

One of them replied immediately, 'Your Urdu is wrong. You're mixing Kannada to cover your ignorance.'

'Malayali Muslims don't speak Urdu. Neither do Tamil Muslims. Besides, how is knowledge of Urdu related to religion?' I was enjoying this. It was like I was enacting a script where the protagonist, a fierce rebel, corners a miserable, superstition-steeped traditionalist. I visualized myself now as both the scriptwriter and the protagonist.

'What? Huh? What? What?' They realized that this was clearly not what they had expected and changed track.

'We have information that you don't eat beef. Is that correct?'

'The religion I was born in regards beef-eating as a sin. This is a belief

and practice I adhered to until I converted to Islam. I find it nauseating if I try to eat it. But tell me, where does it say that beef-eating is an absolute must for someone to qualify as a Muslim?'

This time they didn't stutter or hesitate. They spoke in concert: two bodies, one voice.

'It doesn't matter a whit where or whether it is said. These questions are part of our test to verify if you've completely cut off your kafir roots. And remember, this is just preliminary. If we begin a more detailed investigation, we will have hundred such questions!'

I immediately replied, 'Your argument is amazing! How about if a Muslim, by chance, converts and becomes a Hindu, and Hindu traditionalists insist that he must eat pork to prove that he has completely cut himself off from the roots of his erstwhile religion?'

'What did you just say?' they yelled in unison. And then the one with the flowing, snow-white beard explained my argument to the other Tablighi, who sported a grey beard of the same length as his partner. The grey-bearded Tablighi shot up from his seat and screamed at me.

'How…how dare you! What even gives you the guts to ask this to the Tablighi? Nobody who's born in the Only True Religion can convert out of it. Ever! The person won't even live to see the meat of the pig, let alone savour it! Death is the only punishment for apostasy. Don't you know that?' And then they turned their backs to me and spoke to my father-in-law. 'Did you listen to her words, Yunus Querishi Sahib? Your daughter-in-law has fallen out of line—it's your responsibility to set her right. If you fail, you will be excommunicated. Nobody from the community will visit your house. You won't be allowed to visit anybody. This rule will apply to your daughters as well. You won't receive any help even if there's a death in your house.' They turned to leave, then paused. 'Oh, and tell your son, Amir, to see us.' And they left without giving me a second glance.

Amir was livid. 'For God's sake, why can't you be tactful? Do you have any idea what's going to happen if they excommunicate us?'

'Right! So you're asking me to kill my individuality. Why should I do something that makes no sense to me, Amir?'

'They will interpret "makes no sense to me" as a lack of faith in Islam. Why do you want to allow that?'

'What do you propose? That I vanish inside a burqa and murder my individuality with my own hands?'

‘I didn’t say that! Okay, so here’s the thing. If you wear the bindi when shooting, erase it before coming home. Don’t wear a burqa; wrap a black shawl so it covers your face, head and neck when you come home after work. Eat a bit of beef, rarely. Besides, what’s the difference? The cow is also just an animal, like a lamb or a goat.’

‘You’re sounding exactly like the Tablighis.’

He was silent. His parents had stopped talking to me but his insistence on me following those tenets only increased after that conversation. I decided not to give in. This wasn’t merely a question of tact: it involved surrendering, butchering not just my creativity but my individuality. However, I once surprised Amir just like that. On a hot weekday afternoon, I dragged him to Hotel Ammaan, ordered a gosht biryani and ate it as he sat watching me. His eyes shone with approving happiness. Lunch done, I told him, ‘Amir, I ate gosht to prove that I’ve cut off myself completely from the roots of my previous faith. But if I eat this everyday at home, it’ll mean I’ve sacrificed my self-respect. I need your support at home; I need you to defend my self-respect.’

He said, ‘Razia, that’ll lead to avoidable confrontations. The situation at home is already tense. And this is not a question of just the fear of the Tablighis. My parents actually believe that they’ll suffer in eternal hell after they die if they allow you to continue your current ways—including your refusal to eat beef. You have eaten it today anyway. Why don’t you continue eating it whenever it’s cooked at home?’

I was annoyed now. ‘You’re saying the same thing again! I told you earlier, let’s live separately. We’ll rent a flat and stay there. That’ll solve all problems. Your parents will no longer need to live in constant fear of the Tablighi, or the fear of eternal hell.’ He didn’t reply. I sensed what he was thinking. It wasn’t easy to live all by ourselves. Our careers didn’t really assure us a steady income. The present arrangement worked well, financially at least—a large house, servants and relative luxury. We didn’t pay for the food and other seemingly trivial but recurring expenses. Amir’s parents took very good care of their grandson when I went out of town for several days on work. More importantly, Amir was more attached to his parents than I had initially estimated. Even then, moving to a separate flat would prove burdensome but not impossible. I persisted. Amir refused and I did not relent either.

‘Go if you can’t stay here. I won’t come,’ he said finally.

‘What does that mean? Do you know exactly what you just said?’

‘You’re the dialogue writer.’

‘Let’s hear it in your own words!’

‘In my own words! You want to hear it from me…’ Without warning, his left hand grabbed my hair roughly, pushing my neck down. I could sense his right hand raised high in the air, waiting to strike me.

The door was latched. My child was sleeping with his grandmother. I was stunned. We had had countless arguments and fierce verbal fights in the past but this brutish behaviour was a first. I was scared for a moment but my self-esteem helped me find my voice. ‘Leave me! Now! If I turn around and slap you even once, nothing, nothing will help you regain your mardaan, your manhood!’

He froze in that posture. His left hand, still twisted in my hair, remained there, continuing to hurt me. His raised right hand lay fixed in its position. His eyes showed confusion. I met his gaze. And then I felt his grip relaxing. He dropped his right hand to his side and slowly took his gaze away from mine, focusing it on the floor. And suddenly he stormed out of the bedroom like he had been beaten in a battle or something. He returned in two minutes and almost yelled the words at me: ‘A wife like you only deserves talaq. Talaq! Talaq! Talaq!’ and stormed out of the room.

For a moment I thought this was a scene in a movie. I began to analyse the whole sequence: how he had stormed out of the room, the heavy tread of his footsteps, his stance as he stood before me and the tone in which he had delivered the triple talaq dialogue. And then the tremor started. That he had actually uttered those words. And he was serious. He had just divorced me… Or wait…my mind affixed itself to that one line. I recalled the debate over what actually validated a talaq. Was it valid if the husband pronounced it thrice at one go like he just did or did it take three months—uttering talaq once every month—to validate it? It really didn’t matter. In either case, he had the sole right to pronounce talaq. More fundamentally, the word by itself meant nothing; it was the thought, the mere thought of its application that signalled the beginning of the end of love in our marriage. I was sweating and felt my underwear sticking uncomfortably to my skin. Now I began feeling a little disoriented. I lay down on the bed, scared that I would fall down if I stood for a second longer. I guess I lost sense of time, but I was sure a lot of time had elapsed when I heard the sound of Amir’s scooter starting. He’s going somewhere. He hasn’t told his parents about this conversation.

However angry, he uses discretion—he knows his mother won't let him continue our marriage if he as much as mentions this by a remote accident. I felt a little relieved. It was a dialogue. He didn't mean it. He was simply threatening me, but then he had said the dreaded word and nothing could erase it. And for the first time, I felt that a definite crack had developed in our marriage. After sometime, I began to recall the exact rituals that were performed during our wedding. Then, I hadn't fully understood them. I had only opposed converting to Islam. One of the options I had suggested was to get married at the registrar's office without either of us changing our religions. But how easily I had believed him when he told me: 'Look Lakshmi, my parents and my community won't ever agree to this condition. And then there's nothing special about a wife converting to the husband's religion. But I know and you know that your conversion is a farce, a mere show to convince these religious simpletons that we've let them have their way. Neither of us believes in religion.'

And now, by pronouncing talaq he's used the special privilege reserved only for men in his religion. I began to boil with rage and gritted my teeth involuntarily. I felt betrayed. My mind conjured the analogy of a powerful, untameable beast, which he had trapped into his bone by deceit and was now torturing at will.

He returned very late that night. One-and-a-half-year-old Nazir was sound asleep in his cradle. I didn't say anything. He didn't say anything either, but lay on the bed next to me. His hands didn't reach for my body like they always did. My self-respect, which was beaten when he was away, suddenly awoke when I felt this man's presence…my husband, sleeping barely two inches away…how could you even bring yourself to say talaq, an unparalleled device of female oppression? My mind rewound this line repeatedly but my pride refused to let me initiate conversation.

And thus it stopped—all conversation between us. We slept next to each other now at a distance at which we wouldn't even feel each other's breaths. His parents still didn't know. And when I couldn't bear it anymore, I asked him one night, 'You might as well tell me what's in your mind. It'll be better for both of us than being crushed by silence.'

'It'll be even better if we separate and live in peace than live together like this. I've already completed the first round of talaq. Two more to go. I'll complete that formality in the next two months. I'm sleeping next to you only because it is also part of the formality during the duration of Iddat—by not

touching you despite sleeping next to you, I'd have proven that we are not compatible.'

I felt like weeping right then. But I didn't want to do it in front of him as that would mean admitting that I've lowered my dignity. I held back my tears but immediately rushed to the washroom. I broke down and sobbed my heart out the instant I bolted the latch. Damn these tears—overflowing like milk as soon as it reaches its boiling point. Keeps simmering, but doesn't overflow again. I spent the next half hour inside the bathroom, weeping, till I was sure there were no more tears inside me. I resolved never to cry again, then returned to the bedroom and slept on my side of the bed.

There was no point now in waiting for his two 'remaining' talaqs. I could get out of his house sooner, rent some cheap flat for myself and stay there alone. I mentally worked out the costing: deposit for the flat, rent and the very basic monthly household expenses. It gave me confidence. I decided I would be able to make it work with my current earnings but…Nazir? Who would Nazir belong to? I realized again—painfully—how little I knew about Islamic law. Besides, Nazir had really taken to his grandparents, thanks to my erratic work schedules. Who had the right to his custody—they or I? He shared my umbilical cord, not theirs. But did that really matter, according to their law? I turned to Amir's side: he was sleeping. I silently got up and went to Nazir's cradle, and looked at my sleeping baby for a long time. I bent down and gently kissed his forehead. If I was granted his custody, I decided that I would hire an ayah to take care of him.

I was now prepared for the inevitable talaq. But first I had to talk to Professor Sastri and tell him that he was an indirect contributor to my present plight and he owed some moral responsibility. However, what I really wanted was his help, a solution. He was from my village, plus he was the son of Shesha Sastri, my father's close friend.

My mind drifted back to the days at the Pune film institute…'Falling in love' is such a meaningful phrase in English. I had fallen in love: I told myself this a thousand times back then. To fall in love is to abandon oneself. The mindless excitement I had felt was real. To fall in love is to be foolish. Thoughts about the future and consequences were reserved for the pusillanimous. To fall in love is to instinctively trust that same recklessness to show the way for the future. After we had taken our diplomas, returned to Bangalore and faced the real prospect of getting married, then faced familial opposition from each other's parents, it was Professor Sastri who had stood

rock-solid by our side. He had played a great part in making our marriage a reality. Not just that. He was a role model of sorts—his higher education in England, his marriage to a white Christian girl and the guts he had shown in facing his orthodox father's bitter hostility had made him a fierce revolutionary who was worthy of emulation in the academic and intellectual circles. He was not the first Indian to marry a foreigner, but none of his predecessors had the kind of revolutionary halo he did. His advice was eagerly sought by couples who wanted to marry into a different caste or religion. We had followed suit…no, actually, I had approached him first. I was meeting him after several years. We were alone in his chamber at the university.

'Lakshmi! It feels so wonderful to see you after so many years! How tall and how pretty you've become! Your beauty is a rare blend of the natural, rugged charm of Narasapura and the intellectual maturity of Bangalore!' He embraced me. I wasn't new to random and impulsive physical displays of affection. I used to feel embarrassed in the beginning but gradually grew to accept it as an inevitable part of my professional life, starting with my years in amateur theatre and later in the film world. But his embrace was coated with a warmth that hinted at something beyond mere affection…he had managed to feel up my body, if only for the pathetic duration that the embrace had lasted. I behaved as if nothing happened and said, 'Thanks, uncle!' taking advantage of the fact that he was older to me by ten years.

'Uncle!' he exclaimed and after a long time, emitted a painful sigh. 'When will you ever learn? Our Progressive movement won't progress a millimetre until you erase from your mind these ugly bourgeois relationship labels: uncle! Call me Narayana. Or Sastri. Or professor.'

'I think "professor" sounds natural,' I said.

'That's good! So what's the latest from Narasapura? I can't go there… I'm banned from visiting.'

'Oh well…I guess I'm following your lead then.'

'Really? Great! Who's that lucky fellow? Tcha! Now I think I was hasty. I wouldn't have married a white woman if I had only known that this flower was blossoming in my own backyard! Anyway, I suppose marriages are really made in heaven.' His face was beaming with happiness, his eyes radiating desire. I told him my problem and he listened with the kind of attention that seemed to suggest that my problem was the only reality that existed for him. It felt oddly comforting. When I finished, he leaned forward

and looked into my eyes directly. It was as if he was poised to reveal all the hidden truths of the past, present and the future. This wasn't new to me. I had spent most of my growing-up years listening to his fiery speeches both on stage and off it, in more casual settings. He was an actor who outclassed professional actors. Nobody I knew had mastered the art of elaborately enacting every word he spoke with the perfection of Professor Sastri. When he spoke at last, his eyes were prophetic. 'Lakshmi, listen carefully. Every step that a committed revolutionary takes is a gigantic stride in the onward, unstoppable march of the history of the Progressive movement. You've already put your foot forward. Don't take a step back. I'm there. The entire force of the intellectual class is behind you to propel you. An inter-religious marriage is far more revolutionary than an inter-caste marriage!' He leaned forward, took my hands in his and squeezed hard.

Then he called Amir. 'I know she has agreed to convert to Islam to satisfy an unavoidable social requirement. I won't restrict her freedom. Besides, we're both committed to the Progressive movement and aspire to grow together in our careers in the film world. I know better than her that neither of these goals is achievable if she sits in the zenana like any other Muslim wife,' Amir assured him.

After this, the professor called me separately. 'There are no pre-defined methods to achieve complete revolution. The path itself reveals the way. We need to alter our methods to meet every changed or new circumstance. Flexibility is the key. In your case, you need to "convert" in order to get inside the system, know it intimately and then find ways to slowly dismantle it from within. The urgent need of the hour is to destroy the traditions of the Hindu society because it is the majority community. Equally, we need to apply this to the Muslim society. You must view your "conversion" in this light. Revolution must spread from all directions. Lakshmi, for all its faults, Islam stands for equality. Share whatever you have in equal proportions. If a revolution ever occurs in religion today, it will be on these principles that Islam already embodies. Hinduism is just a feeble relic incapable of anything.'

It began to make sense. Professor Sastri's reasoning was entirely in line with what I had learnt in my amateur theatre days and later in more detail at the film institute—film-making was a form of enabling social change, and not just a mere medium that provided food for deeper contemplation on art and life and similar, outmoded interpretations. I was convinced. To show his

solidarity, he even organized a small function at the university after my nikah ceremonies were completed. The function was held under the banner of the Revolutionary Students' Association, which he had founded. It was rather grand, given the occasion: just a marriage. A huge open-air theatre, elaborately decorated. Professor Sastri gave a stirring speech about how Amir and Lakshmi (*now Razia*) *represented the courageous rebellion against antiquated social and religious norms. He encouraged others to emulate us and finished his speech by making us exchange garlands. All Bangalore-based newspapers carried our pictures on their front pages, accompanied by well-worded reports. Two Progressive journals wrote glowing editorials on this path-breaking event and described it as another victory of the role of the art world, and the intelligentsia as agents of social change.*

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I hadn't met the professor for sometime now. But the worrying turn of events in my marriage made me seek his advice immediately. The automatic directory service told me that his home phone number had changed. I called his office at the university and, as expected, nobody answered my call. In the end, I managed to get his new home number. He was out of town, in Calcutta for a seminar, after which he would leave for Peking next Saturday. I could meet him at the university between Monday and Friday. After he returned, I decided that going to the university wasn't really a good idea. I knew he'd be buried in work. It would be nearly impossible to catch him alone. But I went nonetheless and saw a huge throng of admirers and students and favour seekers, all young people. He saw me and smiled warmly before introducing me to the group.

'I'm sure you all know Razia, the rebel and popular film personality.'

The girls in the crowd looked at me with their collective mouths agape in admiration.

'Do all of you lovely ladies wish to become like your heroine or will you remain content just looking at her with wonderstruck eyes?' Professor Sastri's tone was teasing. And then he addressed me directly, 'Lakshmi, if you've come to see me personally, I'm sure there's something really serious. I'll finish with these budding Progressives and see you at four. Why don't you go to the library and read something till then?'

I went to his office sharp at 4.00 p.m. after spending nearly five hours in

the library.

'Not here. Let's go for a drive. If I'm here, I'm sure one of these pests will find an excuse to disturb us.' I thought that was a sensible idea. As his car left the university campus, he put his left hand on my right shoulder and began stroking it casually. I had expected this kind of behaviour.

'It's been a while…so, are you okay? How's everything? Shall we go to Big Banyan Tree? It's relatively private at this hour. We can talk undisturbed.'

I nodded. His hand didn't stop the stroking. Without showing my discomfort, I said, 'I…umm…I don't know where to start… Oh well! I converted to Islam just so I could marry Amir and…and in an enthusiasm to dismantle its moth-eaten core. But now I realize that I can't stay within that religion without becoming a part of that same moth-eaten core.'

'Really? That's sad! But why did you convert in the first place? Both you and Amir could have walked out of your respective religions. You could have opted for a civil marriage. You would have then become the pioneering role models as a progressive couple,' he said.

I was stunned by his response. This was the same man who had stimulated me four years ago on the urgent importance of 'getting inside' the system to wreck it. I didn't show my shock but reminded him of that conversation.

'Oh yes yes yes! I remember…sorry…tell me the details now. What went wrong?'

I told him and by the time my tale of four years ended, we had reached Big Banyan Tree. We sat on a stone bench under the sunlight-blocking branches of one of the banyan trees. We didn't speak for several minutes. Then he turned to me and summoned that same prophetic look that I now felt was patented by him.

'Do you see how this banyan tree is an eminently fitting metaphor? The primal banyan tree grows and grows and spreads its aerial roots over a large area. These aerial roots, over the years, patiently descend until they touch the earth and beyond. Then they become roots and give birth to a hundred similar banyan trees, which in turn begin to spread their aerial roots. To us, it appears like this enormous tree is standing on hundreds of roots. Can you show me the original root of this tree, that which gave birth to this foliage? I'll tell you. In reality, the root of that first tree has died ages ago. Think about it, Lakshmi—how long can any root live? But then, every aerial root

that touches the earth and then goes underground likes to proclaim that it is the original root. Now tell me, isn't our religion exactly like this?'

As always, I felt mesmerized listening to his words. It felt like he was blessing me with a new vision, a fresh insight, despite my fully knowing by then that his words were designed to charm and persuade. What I didn't know was the fact that charm was often superficial. I was lost entirely in that banyan tree imagery. He was sitting to my left and I suddenly felt his right arm on my shoulder. In the next instant he put his arms around me and pulled me into a light embrace, in a posture that felt like it was not merely physical but the intermingling of two intellects absorbed in the same vision. He whispered in my ears, 'Lakshmi, trust me, this is spontaneous…it happened because I know that at this precise moment we're both wrapped in the same intellectual revelation. This embrace is a profound stamp of that shared revelation.'

I didn't protest, but turned my neck around and fixed my eyes on a slowly-decaying banyan tree. After sometime I said, 'Sir, you told me that Islam is the only religion rooted in egalitarianism. Because my questions made Amir uncomfortable, he pronounced talaq just like that on the wife who had abandoned everything for him because his religion gives him that privilege. Where do I now stand, sir? Do you have any solutions for me?'

The professor let go of me. His expression was introspective. I said nothing.

'Every problem has a solution. Give me Amir's number.'

Five days later, Amir spoke to me on his own volition. It mildly surprised me because I could reasonably guess the real voice behind Amir's volition. I never knew who called him or where he went or whom he met. Until he had pronounced talaq, we had always exchanged information about our plans and programmes every day. But we hadn't spoken to each other since that night.

'Look, I've thought about this whole thing these past few days. It's impossible for my parents to mend or change their thinking and beliefs. They're firmly set in tradition and they're quite old. Let's move out of the house and live separately, like you said. I'll tell them that this house is very far from the studio, our timings are erratic, it's also unsafe when we return home at night and that's why we think that renting a flat near the studio is a good arrangement. We'll visit them on holidays and Sundays and I'm sure they'll agree—but you must promise me something. You will be a Muslim

wife whenever we visit their house. I know they'll never come to the flat.'

That was more than enough confirmation of the professor's role behind this transformation. More importantly, Amir didn't question me about why I had met the professor or what I had shared with him and neither did I volunteer to tell him. I was relieved that I had regained my independence. I wasn't wrong in reposing my love in him. He was by nature a good human being, but had succumbed to the pressures of his religion. Our relationship was back to normal in a few days with none of the bitterness of the past lingering between us.

I fixed an appointment with the professor after he returned from his Peking trip. He told me that he was free after five, the day after tomorrow. His office at the university was deserted and I wondered if it was a good idea to have agreed to meet him alone there. But I was confident I could handle him. My experience of working with all sorts of people day in and day out in the film industry had adequately equipped me with the skills to deal with all kinds of men. Barely a minute after greeting me, he began a travelogue of his Peking trip. He said he was impressed by what he saw in China. Chinese socialism was far superior to the Russian model. A meaningful revolution is one that starts from the ranks of the lowliest peasant. From that perspective, Mao's insights were aeons ahead, in terms of scope and depth, compared to Lenin and Stalin combined. He had my attention now—I was a student all over again and this was my professor delivering an inspired lecture on socialism. His oratory was compelling and his passion irresistible. After about an hour, I steered the conversation to my situation.

'Sir, Amir has told his parents about our decision to move out of that house and we'll vacate it the moment we finalize a new place. I realize that only you could put him back on the right track. I need to know exactly what you told him that transformed him overnight!'

The Professor waved his hand. 'Oh that's nothing! Amir is basically a good lad. He was here, sitting in the same chair'—he pointed to my chair—'I told him that living with one's parents after marriage is one of the distinguishing marks of a bourgeois lifestyle—he should've moved out with you much sooner because that was a symbol of responsibility. You see, responsibility is the key word in this case, whatever the society: capitalistic or socialist. I told him, "Look, Amir; if you had married an original Muslim lady working in the theatre and film world, I'm sure you would've had the same clashes in your family. What would you have done then? But look what

you've done now! Do you have any idea what this will lead to? Word of your talaq will spread. You are an artist, an upcoming director with a brilliant future. The press and public organizations will interpret your talaq as a betrayal—they'll proclaim that your marriage was a trick to lure an unsuspecting Hindu girl and get her converted only to ditch her. Mark me: not one progressive outfit will come to your rescue; on the contrary, they'll boycott you! Producers won't hire you. Your career will be ruined. Every step you take will be closely scrutinized. There's always *a public dimension and consequence to anything that a public figure does in his private life. Did you not think of what message your talaq sends out to the hundreds of young men and women who look up to you as the role model for inter-religious marriage? What's wrong with you? I'm disappointed at your impulsiveness—it's not a good quality in a man who claims he is socially responsible." Lakshmi, he finally saw reason in what I told him…he softened. And remember, I'm always there for you—now and in future. Let me know if he creates trouble for you again,' he finished with a triumphant smile.*

'Thanks…thank you, thank you…many, many, many thanks, sir!' I leaned across and shook his hand vigorously.

'There you go again! Now you're calling me "sir". You know how this upsets me? For the last time, you're special to me! You're my father's close friend's daughter. We have a special right over each other, don't we?' He looked at me. I didn't reply.

'Yes? Or no? You must answer!' he insisted.

'Do I really need to answer this?'

'Well…okay…actually you're right. Verbalizing feelings spoils the silent intimacy. Oh, and I completely forgot! I met Shive Gowda from Kalenahalli sometime ago. He told me that your father has almost stopped his social service. It seems he is locked up in his house, studying something all day.'

The mention of my father made me realize suddenly—and again—that the professor was the only link between me and my father, the only way I could get to know whatever little about him. But the professor's situation was significantly different from mine. He had not converted out of his religion and despite his parents' hostility towards him, he was still permitted to enter the village and speak to some folks there. Besides, he was a man. And then I thought of the reason why he was telling me this on his own, without me asking about it. Was this his way of retaining an illusion of intimacy with me? Possibly. I looked out the window and noticed that it was getting dark, and

then I looked at my watch. He understood and rose.

'You've to reach Shivajinagar… Hmm…let me drop you at Jayanagar. You can take a bus from there,' he said as he walked over to me and gave me a tight hug. Then he lifted my face and kissed my lips passionately. I felt nothing. It was like I was kissing an actor in the rehearsals while explaining a scene. And then he whispered heavily in my ears, 'Lakshmi…you…I…I feel an extraordinary affection for you… Let me…let me know if you are in trouble…any, any trouble. I'm here. Always.' And he held my face again, his lips searching mine. I broke contact and told him softly, 'I'm so grateful to you sir. Let's leave, I'm getting late. I need to reach home soon.'

In the car, Professor Sastri switched to his characteristic academic tone, as if nothing had happened between us a while ago. 'What're you reading nowadays? I've often noticed that you art people stop serious reading the moment you begin to get busy in your creative work. It's bad, no, dangerous for your personal growth.'

I played along.

'You're right, sir. It's not enough to just study cinematic techniques. We should be in touch with literature and music and painting and sculpture.'

'That's my girl!' He beamed. 'You also need to always keep in mind the individual's social responsibility and develop your critical faculties in that direction. Remember, in the end, all of us are answerable to history.'

I began to chew on the conversation I had had with the professor during the bus journey from Jayanagar to Shivajinagar. I could've said those very things to Amir, but would they have had the same impact? I was equally—if not more—popular. Amir's talaq was a pretty scandalous thing. Plus, I was a woman and I'd have the full weight of the women's liberation lobby. The media's sympathetic ear would be far more receptive to my plight. But none of this had struck me. And the answer flashed the next moment. Professor Sastri was an expert negotiator.

The sound of the door opening jolted her reverie and brought her back to the present. Then she heard Amir's voice,'Why are you sitting alone in the darkness?'

'Nothing. I was looking at the river.'

'You can't possibly see anything in this darkness.'

'Well, I wanted to be alone. Just like that. You go back to sleep.'

He left. Suddenly she felt the fatigue. The burden of the past. In a moment,

she yawned and returned to the bedroom.

But the broken images of Narasimha and Vittala and other gods continued to haunt her. It was more than a week since she had returned from Hampi. Her childhood memories of similarly broken idols at Halebid and other places reminded her of the history of the Muslim invaders who had broken them. Hampi shared the same history. The biggest challenge was showing this history in the documentary.

2

A few days later, the professor called Lakshmi at 9.00 a.m. Amir was not at home.

‘Lakshmi, I have the most unpleasant task of delivering some sad news to you. Your father is no more. Kumaresh had come home all the way from Narasapura to convey this news personally to me and told me to tell you. It’s been fifteen days now. I called you about ten times yesterday, but I guess nobody was home.’

She suddenly felt dizzy and weak. She opened her mouth in an ‘O’ but no sound came out.

‘Are you listening to me, Lakshmi?’

She couldn’t reply. She felt a rush of suffocating smoke pervading her senses, the kind that doesn’t sear but slowly presses your insides with its dull, choking force, that blinds, deafens, mutes and finally overwhelms you.

‘Lakshmi…Lakshmi! I…I should’ve given you this shocking news in person but I must go to Delhi for an urgent meeting that I just can’t cancel. Trust me, I would’ve been by your side to comfort you in this grave moment. Try to get a hold on yourself. Please…how long has it been? Umm…twenty-eight years since he severed contact with you? But that doesn’t mean you don’t have any relationship with him. Give the phone to Amir.’

She was still silent. She couldn’t find the words to tell him that Amir was not home. A minute later, she thought she heard a dull click from some place far in time. He had disconnected. She was still clutching the receiver, paralysed, as if some evil spirit had struck her.

And then the tears broke in steady but furious waves, throttling her in succession. Her breath came in short bursts as she spoke to herself. ‘I never deserved to be your daughter. What have I done with my life…filled it with shallow pride and arrogance…I’ve let you down, Father… I am an ungrateful wretch! Ungrateful. A betrayer!’ With sudden violence she began to beat her forehead against the wall next to the divan she was sitting on. The dizziness

soared and she could bear it no more. She let go of the receiver and fell on the divan, landing on her back. Her head began to ache. The vacuum inside her blocked all thought. She felt orphaned, alone in the world. He was all she had had and now he was gone forever, the creeper cut off from the root that had nourished it. No. The root had disowned its own flesh and blood. *He didn't care to call me just once, even in his last moments.* And she broke down completely.

By mid-afternoon her mind had become a little clearer. She tried to piece things together. Fifteen days. All funeral rites were over. Even if they weren't, there was little point in her going there. She wouldn't be allowed to participate in any of them. Her ex-religion didn't permit it. And her current faith viewed these rituals as kafir rites, which were not only condemnable but fit to be destroyed. And she thought, *even if the villagers allowed me to pay some symbolic last respects to him by offering milk and ghee, it would still spell disaster—the Tablighi would learn of this eventually…well, not just the Tablighi, even ordinary Muslims would holler. The dead man belonged to a false faith and nothing but everlasting hell was reserved for him. And I, who had accepted the only true faith, had paid my last respects to such a man! But…I must know all that Kumaresh had told the professor.*

Amir expressed his sympathy that evening when she told him the news. He had never seen her father. She suspected that his sympathy was directed more towards her because she was grieving than it was towards her deceased father. She told Amir that she wanted to go to her village the very next day to talk to Kumaresh. 'If he came here all the way, I'm sure there's something important.'

'Okay, but I'll come with you.'

'No.'

He thought for a bit and agreed. The general atmosphere in the village would terribly discomfit him. She could take a bus till Kunigal and another bus from there to Narasapura. That posed a slight problem as bus services from Kunigal to her village were pretty unreliable. At least, twenty-eight years ago they were unreliable. She wasn't sure now and she didn't want to take a chance. She told Amir she'd drive down and return the same night,

'Or I might stay back for a couple of days. You can use the scooter.'

Her thoughts turned to Narasapura as she drove. She had no idea who she had to meet. Her destination was her house. The highway was not unfamiliar —in these twenty-eight years, she had travelled on that road innumerable

times on her outdoor shooting stints at Mangalore, Hassan and Chickmagalur. She had stopped several times at Kunigal for breakfast or lunch en route. Back then she had assuaged her guilt by blaming her father's unreasonable stubbornness. When her car entered Narasapura, she noticed minor changes…time stood relatively still here. A high school greeted her at the entrance of the village with a board that read 'Sri Lakshmi Narasimha High School'. An Ayurvedic hospital stood next to it. Opposite that was the temple of the village goddess—Gadde Kempamma. The sidikamba, the tall pole that stood in front of the temple, was intact even now, unmodified by time. It was on this sidikamba that the devotee fulfilled his vow. He would embed an iron hook in the sinews of his back and swing back and forth, suspended from the sidikamba. She turned right on the main road. The Lakshmi Narasimha temple—the god that gave her village its name—stood atop the thirty-foot-high rocky hillock. From the top of the hillock, one could see almost the entire village, as well as the large lake beyond its periphery and the paddy fields. She circled the temple and stopped the car in front of her house. It hadn't changed. The large portico made of mortar, the Madras terrace on top of the front roof and the courtyard behind, roofed with Mangalore tiles.

The house was bolted from the inside. She knocked four or five times before shouting, 'Who's there?'

Her own voice surprised her: she hadn't forgotten her rustic ways. A minute later, she heard the door open. A woman of around thirty stood before her. Razia looked at her sari, her bangles and her bindi and concluded that she was a farmer's wife.

'Who are you?'

'Who lives here?' Razia counter-questioned.

'We do, but who are you?'

Suddenly Razia was speechless. She began to grope for a proper response. And then decided to tell the truth.

'I'm Narasimhe Gowda's daughter.'

'Oh!'

And then, 'P…please sit down, please, I'll get a mat for you.' The woman pointed to the portico and went in. She returned in a minute and as she began to spread out the mat, the painful realization hit Razia. *This woman is asking me to sit in the portico*. In the next moment, she understood the full meaning of this welcome. By then, she noticed that her car was surrounded by a bunch of village lads.

‘Please be seated. I’ll call my husband. He’s in the fields.’

She stood there looking at Razia, unable to continue the conversation. On her part, Razia didn’t know what to say to this village woman. She could ask who she was and for how long she’d been staying in the house. But that would be obvious bad manners. After several minutes, Razia spoke.

‘Who all are there in Sastri’s house now?’

‘He and his wife.’

‘I’ll go there and return soon. I think your husband will be back by then.’

She walked down the same road that she had come. After crossing about forty houses, she reached Sastri’s house, located at the foot of the hill. Like her home, this had remained the same as when she had last seen it, twenty-eight years ago. Two platforms of mortar stood on either side of the three steps leading to the door. The main door frame was neatly smeared with vermilion and turmeric. A bunting of mango leaves that hung above the doorsill had withered. The steps were adorned with designs of rangoli. The door was open. Razia stood near the threshold and called out, ‘Is Ayya home?’

‘Who is that?’

She recognized the voice.

‘I’m Narasimhe Gowda’s daughter, Lakshmi.’

‘Oh! Lakshmi! Come, come, welcome! When did you come here?’

His voice was closer now. She suddenly realized that she had cut her hair short, but thankfully she was wearing a sari. However, she wasn’t wearing a bindi, she thought with a bit of regret. As he stood before her, she bent and touched the ground near his feet without letting her hand touch his feet.

‘I’m good… I came here about ten minutes ago.’

Sastri’s head was bald now and his cheeks and chin showed sprouts of white hair. His forehead was smeared with sacred ash and the perfect round dot of vermilion at the exact centre of his brows was almost shining. He was wearing a saffron-bordered dhoti and had a similar uttariya wrapped around the upper part of his body. For no reason he reminded her of her father. Her eyes blurred.

‘Aye! Did you hear that? Our Narasimhe Gowda’s daughter, Lakshmi, has come!’ he called out to his wife.

In a moment, the woman came out. She was over eighty now, slightly stooped at the waist. Her cheeks had a permanent tinge of yellow due to decades of applying turmeric. She sported all the emblems of marriage—a

large bindi on her forehead, the mangalsutra around her neck and bangles on her withered wrinkled hands. Razia prostrated at her feet and heard the sound of the woman's bangles as she blessed her before asking, 'Where are you coming from?'

'Bangalore. I drove down.'

'Sit down. I'll make some dosa.'

'No. I already ate at a restaurant in Kunigal.'

'Why do you eat out? It's not healthy. I'll make coffee now, but you must have lunch here.'

Razia sat on a wooden chair, facing Sastri. His wife, Acchamma, went in.

'I sent Kumaresh to Bangalore. It's been more than fifteen days since your father passed away. You need to take care of his property… Did you come here directly?'

'No. I went home first. I've parked my car there. Some lady lives in my father's house now. She's gone to get her husband. I thought of taking your blessings in the meantime.'

'I'm glad you've retained goodwill towards us.'

'Was Father suffering from some disease, ayya?'

'No. He was eighty-five when he died… Umm…let's see…he was four years younger to me. By that token, I should've gone first, but tell me, is death in our hands? Oh! And he had complained of chest pain the previous evening…that was the end. He didn't wake up the next day. He was an early riser…as early as 3:30 a.m. Kenchappa—the husband of the lady who opened the door—thought he was asleep after reading late into the night, and left for the fields. When he returned at around 9 a.m., your father was still asleep. He opened the door and when he checked, your father's body had already turned cold. He sent word to me through his son. Word about…you know what.'

'So he wasn't aware that he was dying?' she asked him.

'No.'

'Hmmm.' She nodded. He caught the import of her empty nod but didn't volunteer to speak. It would be impolite. A little while later, she spoke.

'If he was aware, would he have called me?'

He didn't reply. She waited. He still said nothing. After about two minutes, she asked, 'Please tell me, ayya. You were his closest friend and I know you know.'

'How can I say what was in his mind, child?' he said.

It was unconvincing. His tone and features betrayed the hesitation he felt.

She knew he was trying to save himself from uttering some unpleasant truth.

'Then why did you send Kumaresh to Bangalore to see me?'

'You are his only successor and heir and it is fair that everything he had is now yours. You owe a responsibility to sort out and manage his estate. If not now, at least sometime in the future. You know how times are, so hurry up and start looking at his property and finances before something happens.'

'He had…disowned me completely. And you hinted that he wouldn't have sent for me even if he knew that he was dying. And now you're asking me to manage his property. How fair is that?'

'Well, since you're asking me this directly, let me tell you everything. Your father told me that all of his landed property is ancestral—a grove of some three hundred coconut trees, ten mango trees and five jackfruit trees, three acres of wetland, eight acres of arable land and that house. Legally, he couldn't will all of that to someone without your consent. If he could, there is no way I can say what he would have done. Remember Ningavva, the lady who took care of you when you were young? She left his house to be with her son about four years ago. Your father then brought Kenchappa and got him married. The couple stayed with him, looked after the fields and did the housework, and they have two children. Your father has made some arrangement for Kenchappa's future. He has willed him a farm of a hundred coconut trees, two acres of wetland and four acres of arable land. He also had a house built for him outside the village. Kenchappa has rented it out to a doctor. Kenchappa is a loyal fellow and his wife is a good woman. Both of them took really good care of your father as long as he was alive. But now you can do as you please. They'll leave if you ask them to.'

She mulled over this. She wasn't surprised at Sastri's intimate knowledge of her father's financial matters. They were very close friends and this was a small village, where everybody knew pretty much everything about everyone's affairs. But the detached manner in which he conveyed these details made her slightly uneasy. She felt like he had mentally distanced her. He was very close to her father and probably—perhaps, naturally—shared her father's opinion about her, and it was unsurprising to her that he spoke the way he did.

She replied, 'I honestly didn't come here to know all this. I have the least interest in taking over my father's property. I didn't know anything about the legalities of ancestral or self-earned property and am not interested in it even now. I came here because you sent for me.'

‘I had a feeling you were unaware of all this. Which is why I sent for you. And I’m glad you came. Kenchappa is actually a little scared because he has no idea what to do now. The coconuts are ripe and ready to be cut and stored, so that they become dry for extracting copra. And it’s not just the coconut trees. He is scared to take the smallest decision even on day-to-day cultivation work. He doesn’t know how business works. Lakshmi, Kenchappa is a very simple but loyal servant. If it were someone else, he would have used the law applicable in such cases and swallowed all of your property. As a first step, you get your father’s death certificate and get the property title transferred to your name…’

They both turned when they heard the sound of heavy footsteps and saw a sturdy villager of about thirty-five or thirty-six walking towards them. He was dressed in a white dhoti, now turned brown. His striped knickers were visible from under the thin dhoti, which he had raised and wrapped around his thighs. He wore a striped half shirt and a towel hung from his shoulders. His hair was unkempt and he wore a five-day-old stubble on his face.

‘Ah, there! Here he is, Kenchappa!’ exclaimed Sastri.

‘Akka, when did you come?’ Kenchappa directly asked Razia, as if he had known her for years. She stood up.

‘Wait, Lakshmi, lunch is almost ready. Have your food here and then go home,’ said Sastri.

Razia told him she would return for lunch after visiting her house.

Kenchappa opened the lock of the small room located on the right as soon as they entered the veranda. He said,‘This is where your father slept. He locked himself up and read day and night. We did not disturb him…nobody knocked on the door if he was inside.’

This room was familiar to her. He used to sit here and spin the chakra for at least two hours every day. But now, the better part of the room was occupied by three enormous bookshelves. Each bookshelf measured seven feet tall and four and half feet wide and had sliding glass doors. Each contained several rows of books. A small divan stood almost attached to the wall. A long, soft pillow was placed against the wall and a study desk was placed almost at the edge of the divan. To the left of the divan was a bed. A blanket was neatly folded and placed on it. She looked up and surveyed the walls. The familiar picture of Gandhi was absent. Another brief survey showed her that the chakra was gone. She peeked into one of the bookshelves through the glass door without opening it. She saw several translations of the

Holy Koran in Kannada and English, four volumes on the life of the Prophet Mohammad (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) written by Margoulith, Sir William Muir, Martin Lings and one in Kannada. Alongside these were English translations of several volumes of the *Hadis, Akbar Nama, Badshah Nama, Tughlaq Nama, Tuzhuk-e-Babri*, volumes of *Ijaz-e-Khusravi, Masir-e-Alamgiri* and similar works that told the history of Islam's triumphs on the Indian soil, all written by contemporary Muslim historians. And then there were several volumes on Indian history written by various scholars and historians. She slid the door and took a quick look at some books at random. Every book she picked up had detailed markings, indicating that they were well read. Pages were marked, pencilled, underlined and notes written in the empty space at the top and bottom. She recognized her father's handwriting. His notes were both in Kannada and English. She began to read a few of the notes he had made in English and was surprised at the fluency. As far as she could recall, his command over English was very basic. He had abandoned his high school to join the freedom struggle and then spent a few years in jail, and after Independence he had devoted most of his life to social service. She opened another cupboard and found the complete set of Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*. She opened one of the volumes—the same well-worn signs. She put it back and looked at other books, mostly tomes on religions by French, German, Japanese, English and Indian scholars. The lower rungs of the shelf contained different variants of the Oxford and Chambers English dictionaries and English–Kannada and Kannada–English dictionaries. Three thick notebooks stood next to them. She opened one—full of English words and meanings all copied by hand from the dictionary. Then she caught the smell of naphthalene emanating from the bookshelf. She turned to Kenchappa, still standing at the door.

'Who put these naphthalene balls here?'

'Sastri Ayya asked me to put them behind the books some days after your father passed away.'

She looked in the direction of the bed, then said, 'Did he sleep here?'

'Hmm. Everyday…his breath left him here, on the same bed.'

She walked over and sat on the bed for a while. Suddenly she wanted to rediscover the insides of the house she had been forever forbidden to enter. She didn't express this desire to Kenchappa. Even if he was willing to, she was sure his wife wouldn't let her anywhere beyond this room. She mulled on the alternatives. She could take the passage that ran the length of the house

by the left side to reach the spacious backyard, which ended in the modestly-sized cow pen. And she killed that thought instantly. Using the passage would automatically mean that she was acknowledging that she was disqualified from using the house like any other member of family, because she was a Muslim. Then she heard loud voices emanating from the porch. She got out of the room, walked out of the front door and as she approached the porch, a woman in her fifties spoke loudly, 'Hey! Aren't you our Narasimhappa's daughter…I know you spoiled your religion and ran away.' Her tone wasn't venomous. And it wasn't an accusation. This was the only way she knew to speak. But 'spoiled your religion'? The words gnawed at her. That woman could've said anything but why 'spoiled your religion'? She didn't even know Razia. She was angry at this unexpected assault on her privacy, but her manners and etiquette stopped her from responding with equal vehemence. She looked at the small crowd of eight or ten people, everybody's eyes trained on her. This woman had neither the upbringing nor the vocabulary to speak any differently. And so Razia nodded her head as she sat on the porch. 'That's right. I'm Narasimhe Gowda's daughter.'

'Why is your forehead blank, my child? When did your husband die?'

This time, it was a very old woman. Razia's face flushed but she managed to retain her composure, reminding herself again of the background of the people she was dealing with. These women couldn't imagine a married woman not wearing a bindi on her forehead when the husband was still alive. They'd look at her with shock and disbelief if she told them that the religion she had married into considered wearing bindi as a heresy of faith and prescribed everlasting hell as the punishment for this. They couldn't simply fathom even the existence of such a faith. And so she simply answered, 'I had worn it. I guess it must've fallen off.'

By then a fifty-something man had arrived upon the scene and when he heard this, he said, 'Oyl Lakkavva! The Turks don't wear bindis! Haven't you seen their women in Kunigal?'

She looked at him for a moment and then surveyed the rest of the folks. There was no hint of scorn, sarcasm or censure in either their tone or expression. But that only made the truth clearer to her: this was their way of determining her exact status in the village. This kind of cross-examination was familiar and she knew that if this age-old practice hadn't changed in twenty-eight years, it was unlikely to change now.

But this questioning wasn't restricted to the village. She recalled the

painful apartment-hunting exercise she and Amir had done. People were set in their ways even in cosmopolitan Bangalore. Who your neighbour was depended upon what caste you belonged to and whether you ate non-vegetarian food, although some people were willing to overlook the caste element. Some were non-vegetarians themselves but they were loath to welcome folks that belonged to another religion. And when they finally managed to find an apartment in the still traditional Malleswaram, they discovered that they were alone. Segregated. Nobody would talk to them. Most of their neighbours in the apartment complex were aware that they had a celebrity couple of sorts in their midst, but they persisted in their cold indifference. And she was under no illusion that this was some price they were paying for fame: their neighbours were mortally scared of her revolutionary ways. They didn't want her to be the role model for their daughters. Almost all the families in the apartment complex forbade their children from even smiling at her. But that was in the city, in the orthodox Malleswaram, which knew the subtleties of enforcing a silent boycott even twenty-five years ago. These were simple village folk, whose directness was almost rude.

A boy of about fifteen years suddenly almost rammed his way through, stopped in the middle of the crowd and yelled breathlessly, 'Sastri Ayya asks the Bangalore madam to come to his house now! Food is ready!' and ran away.

This was an unexpected but much-needed relief. She rose and left.

She sat by the pillar at Sastri Ayya's house opposite to him, resting her back against the pillar as she sprinkled water on her plantain leaf. He sat just outside the kitchen. Not too orthodox, she thought. But she felt very wretched about herself each time the eighty-plus woman bent to serve her. She felt compelled to say something.

'When did Father begin to read all those books? He didn't even know English properly.'

'We must not talk about unpleasant things while eating. I'll tell you later.'

'I won't feel bad. I need to know the truth.'

'Eat now.'

That was the end of the conversation.

Lunch done, she got up, washed her hands and returned to her place. According to custom, she folded her plantain leaf, cleaned the floor with water and wiped it with the cloth meant for the purpose. Then she sat on the

wooden chair opposite Sastri Ayya, now reclining on the divan. He opened the conversation.

'Child, you have no idea what your father underwent after you left his house, converted and married. But he was made of sturdy stock, thank God for that. And he had always been that way. He was a man of great self-restraint who never showed his pain, anger or sorrow to the world. He asked me once, "Why do these things happen, Sastriji?" with only the slightest tremor in his voice. I told him that karma dictates all actions, that your karma made you do what you did and that we all have to suffer our lot. But that was just my attempt to give him solace. He wasn't convinced. He just shook his head and said, "Your karma philosophy doesn't answer anything clearly." And then the whispers from neighbouring villages gradually became louder and began to show up in everyday transaction. "His own daughter did this and he still comes to us to preach." He slowly reduced his social service tours and completely stopped it one day. On one of his visits to the Gandhi Study Centre in Bangalore, he met a gentleman named Venkataramanayya. Their conversation turned to society, books, Gandhi and religion. And then Venkataramanayya asked your father if he had read the Holy Koran and the *Life of the Prophet Mohammad*. Your father said no. Venkataramanayya told him that it was not wise to hold an opinion on things he barely knew about. Your father told him it was impossible to read those books because they were in Arabic. The gentleman replied that English translations were available. Your father said that his English was very poor. Venkataramanayya took him to a bookshop, bought him a dictionary and suggested some broad guidelines for study: *write down the meanings for the words you don't know and refer to them now and then. It'll be tough in the beginning but your mind will tune itself to it eventually.* That's how your father began. He visited Bangalore regularly for Venkataramanayya's guidance and eventually outgrew the need for it. A bookstore in Bangalore couriered him the books he wanted to read, published in India as well as abroad. He became immersed in his studies.

'I asked him what he wanted to do after all that studying. He told me he wanted to write a scholarly work in Kannada. But God called him to his abode before he could accomplish that. You know, a couple of days after his death, a history lecturer from Tumkur came here, to Narasapura. This is what he told me. "Narasimhe Gowda's depth of scholarship in Indian history is truly astounding. His knowledge of and insights about the Muslim conquest of India is several notches higher than our university's history professors."'

Neither of them spoke. Razia sat still for a long time, engrossed in thought. Suddenly, she wanted to read all the books he had read. Her English was good. The Hampi assignment had trained her in the methodology of historical research. A moment later she realized that she had merely read handbooks and pamphlet-like historical material, whereas her father had investigated the primary sources. She made up her mind. She would read them all and if she faced any difficulty, she would consult scholars and make sure she would… Suddenly she asked,'Where did the dafan happen?'

'What is dafan?… Oh, you mean where his body was buried?'

'Yes. I want to go there and pay him my respects…alone.'

'Our Narasimhe Gowda didn't explicitly say how he wanted his body to be treated after he was dead. But I recall he told me once that he considered cremation was better and more hygienic than burial. Usually they bury the dead according to their caste's traditions, but because I remembered what he had told me, I had his body cremated on top of the small mound in your farm. Kenchappa lit the pyre, performing his duty…like a son. I officiated. After that Kenchappa put the ashes in two separate pots. He kept them with him in your house for three days and then buried one of the pots next to the graves of your forefathers. It's there behind the bael tree in your farm. The other pot is still in the farmhouse. It should've been scattered in the river at Sangama eleven days after the cremation. I'll send Kenchappa to Sangama one of these days.'

'I must go now, ayya, and pay my respects to Father,' she said in a heavy voice.

He nodded. 'Sure. You know the place. But all the same, take Kenchappa with you.'

By the time she reached home, she had made up her mind to go alone. She wanted nobody else there when she was meditating on the memory of her father. She took the keys to the farmhouse from Kenchappa. He volunteered to go with her but she declined. She quickly reached the outskirts of the village and entered a large field. It was the first field and it belonged to her father. The one next to it was owned by Mudigere Rangappa. Then the wetlands began. She walked on straight, crossed the canal-like stream and suddenly stopped and looked to her left. It was almost like an explosion of maize, which seemed to shoot up from below after breaking the earth, standing tall with parrot-green leaves shimmering and swinging in the late afternoon sun. Several steps later, she reached a fork. She stood there for a

moment, unsure about which way to turn but then she remembered—*I need to turn right.* Two minutes later, she was at the gate of the farmhouse. She noticed that an iron gate had replaced the bamboo gate she had seen twenty-eight years ago. She unlocked it and stepped inside. The coconut trees inside the farm had grown taller over those twenty-eight years. She crossed the spacious well right at the centre of the farmhouse, turned left and after a few steps reached the mound at the far end on which stood the grove of bael trees. It wasn't really a grove but a cluster of six trees. The mound was, in a way, a mini-graveyard where her ancestors were buried. Six graves. And then the seventh. It had a stone slab over it and it was still fresh.

She removed her footwear, walked to the grave and stood almost touching it. She looked down at it and closed her eyes, trying to summon memories of her father. She saw him as he was twenty-eight years ago. She stood still for a few minutes, opened her eyes, sat and touched her forehead to the stone and closed her eyes again. Then she stood up and looked at the other tombs. Her mother; her grandfather, Narase Gowda; then his father, Shinge Gowda; then his father, Venkate Gowda; then his father…she didn't know his name. She stood there among her ancestors in silence for a long time.

When she returned, Kenchappa was not at home. His wife Lakshmamma asked her if she wanted tea.

'Oh yes! Absolutely!' she said, entering her father's study. There she sat on his divan and pulled the study table towards her.

~

After spending long hours behind the wheel, she finally reached Bangalore. The maid, Amina Banu, opened the door and let her in. She plopped on the sofa and suddenly felt directionless. *Amina Banu takes care of all the housework. She cooks and cleans the house and washes Amir's and my clothes. The house runs anyway, whether I'm here or not. I'm wasting my time here. No. Wait. Actually, there's nothing here. It's all there at Narasapura. All those books. So much to read. Father.*…Suddenly she shot up from the sofa, then, equally suddenly, sat down and leaned back weakly into the soft cushion. She was exhausted from the driving. And the emotional strain of the past few hours were taking a toll. *I must go. Or get those books here. No no no. Doesn't make sense.* She turned her head in the direction of her study where she wrote her screenplays and scripts. *No. There's no space*

left in this box of a study. Nazir's room is ideal. But it'd inconvenience him when he comes here during his vacation. Besides, he'll marry eventually… We could've planned to build another room but where was the money? I didn't see Father at all till he… I should've told Sastri Ayya that I wanted to go to Sangama with Kenchappa to immerse Father's ashes. Or even better, I should've told him I'll take Father's ashes in my car and that way Kenchappa and Sastri Ayya could travel with me.

And then she debated whether it was worth the effort: involving herself in these rituals of a faith she had abandoned. Then again, she wasn't sure. Something had changed yesterday. Her visit to the village after twenty-eight years and what Sastri Ayya had told her about Father's gradual change, that enormous pile of books he had read. His astonishing command over English. How he had striven to learn English in his quest for knowledge. The history lecturer who visited to pay his last respects out of genuine respect for her father's self-earned scholarship. And then when she had touched her father's grave with her forehead a sudden realization had struck her: *have I really abandoned my previous faith?*

'Snacks ready, madam!' Amina's voice came from somewhere.

She ate a sandwich and an omelette and drank some tea. The phone rang two minutes later. Amir.

'I reached about an hour ago.'

'I'm very relieved to hear that. I expected you yesterday. You went there after so many years. I was worried that they'd done something to you.'

'Nothing. They treated me like a daughter who visits her parents' house after many years. Come home. I'll tell you everything.'

'Our cinematographer, Guru, spoke to me. His schedule is free for the next three months, starting from the tenth. He thinks it's good to begin the Hampi project as soon as possible. But your introduction, explanations of the history of the place…nothing is ready! How do I do an outline for the shooting? We need your script now!'

'Oh!'

'I'll try to be home as early as possible,' he said and disconnected the phone.

The mention of Hampi brought in its wake the broken images of Ugra Narasimha and all those ruins. Together, they besieged her mind with a violence that surprised her. She recalled that she hadn't seen the Narasimha temple when she went to Narasapura just yesterday. The thirty-feet-tall

Narasimha idol inside the temple had been there even before the village grew around it. It was standing—still stood—on the hillock, an imposing creation made entirely of stone. For some reason, it reminded her of Ugra Narasimha in Hampi. She suspected this temple was not known beyond Narasapura and a few surrounding villages. And it was still surviving intact. Probably no nawab or sultan raided this village. She was mildly shocked at this almost involuntary explanation. And that made it even tougher to prepare the script for the Hampi documentary the way the Heritage Department wanted it to be made.

When Amir came home in the evening she explained everything she had observed in Narasapura and said, 'I'm sorry, Amir, but I don't think I can do the Hampi script. I don't want to create needless controversies. Find someone else to do this. Please.'

'But I haven't done any movie without your script.'

'Reject this one offer. Just this one.'

'It's not that easy. We're dealing with the government. They won't take it kindly. If I reject this, the Heritage Department will shut the door on me forever.'

That sounded plausible. She sat down at her desk, but the words would just not flow. Two days later, she was convinced it was impossible. *I can't do this.* 'I need to go to Narasapura and then drive to Sangama to immerse Father's ashes in the river. I'll take the car again. It might take me five days to return. Use the scooter,' she said.

Amir didn't respond but his expression was stern. She took his hand and caressed it

'Angry because I refused to write the script?'

'You call yourself a communist, a rationalist and a Progressive. I'm amused—the icon of Progressiveness taking refuge in crass symbolism of religion; immersing sacred ashes in Sangama…these are scenes we show in our films.' The unexpected sarcasm stung her. She let his hand go and stared at him.

What about your trademark beard's symbolism, which projects you as both an enlightened socialist intellectual and a modern Muslim at the same time? she was tempted to retort but she said nothing.

'I can find another scriptwriter but our wavelengths match perfectly. You can't abandon me at the last minute, Razia,' he said.

She didn't respond even to this.

But she remained in Bangalore. After three days she began feeling restless. The pull of her father's still-incomplete last rites and the lure of all those books grew intense. She packed for a week in a lightweight suitcase, rolled two large blankets, put this luggage in the boot and told Amir that she would be gone for a week. He was mum now, like he had been ever since they had had that conversation. She was tempted to mollify him but that meant she had to agree to write the script. And so she left. He didn't come to the balcony to wave her off as usual.

~

This time she wore a bindi. She unpacked her luggage in her father's study, told Lakshmamma that she was here for a week and asked her to prepare lunch for her every day. Then she set out for Sastri Ayya's house.

'Ooh! When did you come? Have some breakfast, daughter,' Sastri Ayya's wife offered warmly.

She smiled and politely declined.

'Ayya, can I immerse my father's ashes?'

'Definitely! You're his own daughter.'

'But I've converted to Islam.'

'There's no conversion. The religion you were born into doesn't go away because you choose to abandon it. What matters is whether you've committed any sin. Have you eaten beef?'

'Yes.'

'Then you must atone.'

'How? I don't know the ritual…'

'The ritual is not important, really…you'll know as we go along. And your focus is not the ritual but its essence: your mind and consciousness must first realize, truthfully, that you've committed a sin, and then you must resolve that you will never commit it again. Let me warn you, it is not easy. Tell me if you are ready for this. I'll personally help you with the atonement ritual. Once that's done, you will be ready to immerse your father's ashes.'

She was stunned. Was it really this easy?

'I'm ready, ayya,' she said firmly.

As the first step, she spent three days and three nights in the temple on a strict diet of milk and fruit. On the fourth day, Sastri Ayya initiated her into a purification fire ceremony. Through these days and during the ceremony, she

reminded herself that she was doing this to cleanse herself of the sin of eating beef. The next morning, they were on their way to Sangama. Ayya sat in the backseat as she drove, the covered pot containing her father's ashes securely placed on the front seat, tied with a cord that passed around the seat in two circles and knotted tightly. At the river in Paschima Vahini near Sangama, she took three dips in the water. Ayya began to chant the appropriate mantras as she began to immerse her father's ashes.

She sat down on the long, spacious steps, water still dripping from her dress. Her father's memory suddenly had a quality of intimacy she had never experienced before. She wasn't fully convinced whether beef-eating was a sin, but she found a sense of comfort that she had really atoned for hurting her father. With it, her resolve of reading all the books he had laboured so hard to read became firmer. She really didn't need to write screenplays to earn a living. The creative thrill she used to experience at the start of her film-making career was now replaced by routine. And she had enough money. Plus, she now had her father's modest property. This was a welcome break.

She decided against moving her father's library to Bangalore. She wanted to experience his solitude in the environment he had created. She would bring him back to life through her studies. More than anything, she sought emotional oneness with him. She estimated two or three years of undisturbed study. *Amir… I'll miss him… He'll be angry. He's upset already… Amina will take care of the house and his food.* She decided to visit Bangalore once a month and stay with him.

3

Dearest Ammajaan,

Salaam Aleikum, Bismillah Rahmaan ur Rahim

I got your letter. I was surprised when I heard that you're mostly in your village nowadays. I didn't even know you had a native village. You never told me. I didn't know I had a grandfather on my mother's side. To tell you the truth, I hadn't thought you had a father who was alive till recently. Now I understand. Your father was a stubborn man. He severed ties with you because you converted to Islam. And it makes sense. I recall what granny and grandpa used to tell me when I was small—Hindus are narrow-minded idol-worshippers and treat all other religions as inferior. I think you're living there now because you're suddenly attracted to your native faith. But I miss you, Ammajaan. And I can't even call you. Your village has no phone. Writing is quite painful. After living in America for so long, I find it easier to call. But now I can't even write freely because every letter that goes out of Saudi passes through the censor authorities. I can't write without fear—the authorities interpret words the way they think is right and their judgment is final. It makes sense to call you. Come back to Bangalore, at least for the sake of your son. I have sent this letter through my friend, Janaab Shabbir Khan, who lives in Lucknow. He told me that he was visiting India for his vacation and agreed to post this letter to you.

Now I must tell you about Saudi. It's the most orthodox among all Arab countries. No other Arab country practises Islam with such purity or rigour. This is the land where the Most Holy Prophet (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) was born! I must confess I felt suffocated when I first landed here and thought this was a society with no freedom whatsoever. I mean, after living in the university campus

in Texas for more than three years, I had got used to a different way of life. But I came here because the money is really very good—I'm being paid double the salary compared to those who studied in Asia. Actually, the double salary offer was not only because I was a top-ranking masters in petrochemical engineering from a US university, but also because I'm a Muslim: I was given priority in the selection process. And you know what, Ammajaan, salary is tax-free. Saudi is a paradise. No other country, not even America, has this opulence. You have an incredible variety of everything. Plus, it's all the best—only the freshest food, the finest diamonds, gold, jewellery, silver and all the latest electronic gadgets. They import everything and sell it at really cheap prices and they don't have all those stupid taxes that the so-called advanced economies levy on hard-working people. Despite all this, crime—even petty crimes like cheating, fraud and adultery that are commonplace in the so-called independent countries—is almost nil. They display all those dazzling, expensive jewellery in the open and don't even keep it in glass cases. They leave their shops open and rush to the mosque when the Adhaan calls are given for Zuhar, Assar and Mugrib namaz. When they return, everything remains intact. Does it not surprise you? The law is strict beyond imagination: a thief is caught within minutes. His hands are chopped off. There's no question of mercy and there's no delay. Shariyat works beautifully. There's no nonsense of courts, appeals and counter-appeals, and benefit of doubt and burden of proof and all those delaying tactics here. The punishment is as severe as the crime, and justice is as swift. I think this system is very effective. I feel it just proves that such laws are necessary to maintain order in society.

Ammajaan, I know you don't wear any jewellery except when you attend parties. But when I go to the malls—that's pretty much all the entertainment I get here—and I see the piles of gold and jewellery, it makes me want to buy something for you. And the quality of gold here is amazing! You don't get anything remotely close to this purity in India. When you write to me, tell me your wrist measurement (in centimetres). I'll buy a pretty set of gold bangles for you. You must wear it—it'll look really good on you. The only problem, though, is the extortionist duty they'll levy when I get them to India. My Indian colleagues tell me I would need to bribe the customs fellows…but I

think it's worth it because even after the taxes are paid, it still works out cheaper.

Your loving son,

Nazir

Razia caught the gist of his letter and felt a twang of sadness.

After we moved out of Amir's parents' home, Nazir was under Amina Banu's care for some time. I wasn't ready to quit my blossoming career midway and stay at home as a full-time mother. The illiterate working-class maid used the only ways she knew to control young Nazir's childish tantrums —she threatened him, pinched him and when these methods failed, she beat him. And so we decided to leave Nazir at his grandparents' house every day. Amir would drop him off in the morning and pick him up at night after work. The old couple was overjoyed and indulged him. He grew more attached to his grandparents than to us, his own parents, but he very quickly learned to switch his behaviour depending on who he was with at the time. When he was with us, he'd say and do things that he instinctively knew would please us and he would repeat the feat when he was with his grandparents. His grandparents had schooled him quite well in Islamic orthodoxy. And we didn't realize…I didn't realize this until Amir's parents died. If Amir did notice, he didn't tell me. Nazir says that he didn't know he had a grandfather on his mother's side and says nobody—not even Amir—had told him this… and he believes Hindus are small-minded idol worshippers, no doubt a lesson grilled into him by his grandparents.

But she was happy that he had written to her. Bless the boy!

4

A few days later, Razia saw a motorcycle parked at the porch as she returned from the morning's visit to the fields. As she came closer, she saw the two men sitting on it stand up. She recognized Jaleel, one of Amir's assistants. He greeted her with a 'Salaam aleikum' and introduced his partner as Raghu, the second assistant to the cinematographer. She smiled at both and accepted the envelope that Jaleel gave her with her name written on it in Amir's handwriting.

She called out to Lakshmamma, asked her to make breakfast for three and went into her study. Her heart fluttered with delicious anticipation. Amir couldn't write Kannada properly but he could read it. He was educated in Urdu. Razia had learned the language but found it impossible even now to read the script when it was handwritten. And so they always wrote to each other in English. She could reasonably expect the ever-romantic Amir to write her a love letter. Two entire months without her would have driven him crazy. She tore the envelope open and began to read.

My dearest bibi,

I would be lying if I told you I'm not upset with you. But I've been so busy that I don't have the time to be upset. The government has given me a new project! Well actually, two new projects, and we must begin work immediately. This time, it's historical plays. The titles are already final—*Akbar the Great* and *Tipu Sultan: A National Hero*.

The scope is ambitious. Apart from writing and directing, we need to train professors and teachers in all major colleges and universities in Karnataka on how to enact this play in their own institutions. But it doesn't stop at this! After we finish Hampi, we need to work on documentaries showcasing Gol Gumbaz, Saranath, Nalanda and Taj Mahal. But bibi, with so many projects already, I just can't take on these plays. You will do them, right?

Do you remember the years when we used to perform on stage? Wish we could go back to those days. I still meet theatre lovers who ask me when we'll perform together on stage again. Like I said, I'm terribly busy and I really can't spare time for these two plays much as I want to. It's a one-time thing—write the scripts, direct them, stage them in schools and colleges, then train other directors. Please? And don't worry about money. The government has a personal stake in this. But now, come to Bangalore as soon as you can and meet Professor Sastri. He'll tell you how to go about this.

Lovingly yours,
Amir

She was thrilled. It had been so long since she had all but left theatre. Film-making had sapped her, cut her almost completely away from theatre. She wondered if she actually had the discipline now to sit down and write those plays. Then she reminded herself that it was *her* domain—like swimming, you could learn and never forget. *How long would it take to write the scripts? And they are historicals, so that means I don't need to temporarily stop my history studies. I can do both simultaneously. I'll discover some method as I go along. Let me see what the professor says. I'll be able to spend sometime with Amir that way.*

Professor Sastri was delighted when she met him after she returned to Bangalore. 'I'm so happy that you agreed to do this. Actually, this is my brainchild, which the government willingly accepted because it is urgent to check the communal cancer that's spreading like wildfire. Only artists and writers have the necessary skills to cure this. An entire body of ministers including the chief minister saw the wisdom in my words. Plus, lots of money will come your way. Devote yourself to the service of history.' He gently patted her back.

Amir, on the other hand, was seething. He told Razia that there was an all-night shooting schedule and he had to leave.

'You're a horrible liar, Amir…you know that no studio in Bangalore allows shooting documentaries. Or is this an ego thing? It's bad manners to play with a woman's feelings like this, especially after she's come just for you after two months of separation. Or is this the Muslim husband in you speaking to his wife?' she teased and then threw the gauntlet, which she

knew he would pick up, ‘Or is anger your excuse to conceal your age?’ she said softly and stepped closer to him.

She returned to Narasapura the next day and rummaged through her father’s pile of books, looking for material on Tipu Sultan. Fortunately, she found a bunch of handwritten papers stapled together. Her father’s notes on Tipu, in his own handwriting. She read through them quickly and began to look up other reference books on Tipu. When that was done, she went to Bangalore and spent a day in the library reading up additional material and making notes. Amir was not in town and Amina Banu had gone to Ramanagaram to visit her daughter. She returned to Narasapura and reflected on the notes she had made about Tipu Sultan. Every work she had read about Tipu, indeed her entire research on him, showed him in exactly the opposite colours of what the secularists in the old Mysore region and the Indian Muslims painted him in. *Professor Sastri won’t let me stage the play if I write the script based on the history I’ve read.* An*d he has already decided the title* —Tipu Sultan: A National Hero. *My script needs to show Tipu as a spotless ruler, tolerant of diverse faiths. Just a hint of the truth about Tipu and the government will choke the funding. This won’t be easy. It’s impossible to ignore the sordid record of his incredible cruelty and religious fanaticism. It’s technically easy to write a play. You have a plot. Create characters. Have them mouth whatever dialogue that suits your propaganda. But Tipu is different. You need a special technique to give a shape and form to the complexity of his character, complete with his cruelty, his fanaticism and his hatred of other religions. I need to talk to Amir.*

So she wrote to Amir.

Dearest Amir,

Trust you’re fine. Tell me you miss me. I do. Everyday I hope that your love for your bibi will drag you here. You’ve never come here to see me even once. People here are very sweet; they’ve accepted me like I’m their own daughter. You need to come here often. They’ll forget everything and treat you like you’re their son-in-law. I’m saying this from experience—whatever their caste and community divisions, Hindus have retained their age-old attitude of transcending these differences. Come here and experience it first-hand. You’ll understand what I mean.

But now there's an urgent reason I'm writing to you. I need your input, your guidance as a creative artist. You know I've been researching over the past two months on Tipu for the play Professor Sastri wants me to write. Every new material I come across alerts me as to how tough it is to stage that play. I wanted to come to Bangalore to discuss this with you, but writing helps me express my thoughts much more clearly.

Amir, some writers, especially a huge chunk of Kannada writers in the old Mysore region, have glorified Tipu Sultan to sickening degrees. Is there no end to their slaughter of truth done under the mask of exercising creative freedom? I've always believed that there should be no restriction of any kind on writers. I must now admit with some shame that while at one time, I was part of this same group that loudly howled about unconditional, unlimited artistic freedom, I now realize what they were—me included—doing all along. We hollered about our right to artistic freedom, but denied the same freedom to our critics. What we did was gangsterism—we defined everything. Our idea of progress was Progress, our classification of dialectics became Logical Reasoning, our definition of economics was Economics and we had the Final Word on history because, well, because we were doing all of this in the service of history. Spreading the distorted version of Tipu Sultan's story is just another page in their grand project of projecting falsehood as truth because it helps the march of Progressiveness. And I've happily played my part in this, leading from the front on several occasions.

The legend of Tipu as a hero started during the period of our freedom struggle as songs sung by wandering minstrels. These rustic, uneducated, illiterate singers sang his praises at street corners, before shopkeepers, at village fairs and in marketplaces to earn their livelihood. It's incredible to seriously believe that these folks had any accurate idea of the historical Tipu. Rich Muslim shopkeepers paid them quite handsomely to listen to the praises of the long-deceased sultan. But because it was the time of our struggle for independence, anybody who had fought in the past against the British for whatever reasons was automatically considered a freedom fighter. Thus, plays were written at that time glorifying Tipu as a patriot and audiences believed these plays. And this was really how Tipu became a

legendary freedom fighter in the popular imagination. This trend continued post-Independence. Myths are hard to create but far harder to destroy. Our Marxists, vote-bank politicians, artists, film-makers… everybody wanted a piece of this heroic Tipu. And so, true history was buried. Nobody bothered to verify the basis of the legend of Tipu Sultan the Great.

Look how insidiously an idea is buttressed with careful deletion of facts. As an example of British hard-heartedness, our eminences harped on the British taking Tipu's two sons as hostages. However, they concealed the fact that taking war hostages was originally an accepted practice among Muslim kings. Mir Jumla, a general under Aurangzeb, defeated and looted the entire treasury of the king of Assam. And he didn't stop there. He demanded more money and took the king's sons and a daughter as ransom till the king brought him the sum. Mir Jumla also took the sons of the king's feudatories—Burhagohain, Borgohain, Gad Gonia Phukan and Bad Patra Phukan—as prisoners of war. Saqi Mustad Khan records this event in *Masir-i-Alamgiri*, Aurangzeb's authorized history, written in 5th Al Hijra 1072.5, which corresponds to January 1603. I looked this up in Jadunath Sarkar's *A Short History of Aurangzib* (Orient Longman, 1979, p. 108). When Khurram's rebellion against his own father failed, Jahangir took his son's sons—his own grandsons, Dara and Aurangzeb—as captives.

Not just that: during the Mughal rule, every Rajput king had to station at least one son in the badshah's court as a sign of respect. The undertone of this arrangement was clear to both parties—the son was a glorified hostage, ensuring obedience from the Rajput kings. It might surprise you but this custom was inaugurated by Akbar. This took on other forms—a Rajput ruler defeated in war had to marry his daughter off to the Mughal king—a wife, but nevertheless a permanent hostage, really. Most Rajput kings agreed to this, given their vanquished status. Maharana Pratap was the exception. He refused to send his son to Akbar's court. It is also a fact that every such prisoner was compulsorily converted. But Cornwallis, who took Tipu's sons as hostages, treated the boys with the care and propriety that befitted royal heirs, something that none of the Muslim rulers did in similar circumstances. If our progressive historians and writers

paint Tipu Sultan in heroic hues for the sole reason that he fought the British, why do they remain mute about the Marathas, who fought the same British? The British by their own admission had identified the Marathas as a bigger threat to their imperial ambitions. And then there's this other mass of very vocal Kannada-language champions who hail Tipu as the 'son of Karnataka' and the 'true son of Kannada'. Kannada was the official language of the state when the Wodeyar dynasty ruled over the Mysore kingdom. I'm talking about the time before Tipu's father, Hyder Ali, a trusted general of the Wodeyars, usurped the throne of Mysore. But when Tipu took over, he changed the administrative language from Kannada to Farsi. You can see this even today. Land and revenue records in Karnataka use Farsi terminology till date —'Venkata Gowda's son Narasimhe Gowda' is written as 'Narasimhe Gowda bin Venkata Gowda'. Similarly, we've still retained 'Khata', 'Khirdi', 'Pahani', 'Khanesuvari', 'Gudasta' and 'Baranamoona', a direct handover from Tipu's times. Not just that—Tipu changed the names of entire cities and towns: Brahmapuri became Sultanpet, Kallikote became Farookabad, Chitradurga became Farook yab Hissar, Coorg became Zafarabad, Devanahalli became Yusufabad, Dinigul became Khaleelabad, Gutti became Faiz Hissar, Krishnagiri became Phalk-il-azam, Mysore became Nazarabad, Penukonda became Fakrabad, Sankridurga became Muzaffarabad, Sira became Rustumabad, and Sakleshpur became Manjarabad—are these samples of Tipu's nationalism and religious tolerance?

But Tipu merely followed a time-honoured precedent set by most Muslim rulers: renaming cities from their original Hindu names to Islamic ones. Aurangzeb renamed Chatagaon to Islamabad. After demolishing the Keshava temple in Mathura, he renamed it Islamabad as well. In his time, Varanasi or Kashi became Mohammadabad. Other Muslim rulers also did their bit: Delhi became Shahjahanabad, Agra became Akbarabad, Golconda became Hyderabad, Bidar became Zafarabad, Kadapa became Neknamabad, Kalpi became Mohammadabad, Khandauth also became Mohammadabad, Prayag became Allahabad and today's Aligarh was called Kol.

This list is just a fraction—my father's research yielded eight pages, complete with the names of cities, towns and villages that were

renamed. I'm reproducing his note on the subject: 'This list is incomplete. The ideal method is to tour every corner of India and talk to scholars and local people and then compile a comprehensive volume of the list of places that have been renamed during Muslim rule. I wouldn't really care if they built a town from scratch and gave it an Islamic name. But renaming existing cities is as heinous as forcibly converting a living, breathing person to another religion.'

Amir, my father's notes open a whole new world. I'm still unable to imagine how he managed to accomplish so much.

But back to Tipu. My father's copy reads, 'Tipu Sultan's dreams'. It's a bunch of papers, all typewritten. The original was written by Tipu himself in Farsi. It was a highly secret document, which he wrote, and he read what he had written only when he had absolute privacy. Colonel William Kirkpatrick, the British army officer who participated in the Fourth Mysore War in which Tipu was killed, found these papers in Tipu's toilet in the Srirangapatanam palace. Tipu's trusted servant Habibullah recognized Tipu's handwriting. Kirkpatrick himself translated several of these from Farsi to English. The India Office in London still retains the original and some translations.

Tipu himself speaks in these papers, which are effectively the strongest and first-hand evidence of his fanaticism. He always refers to Hindus as kafirs and the British as Christians. You must read Tipu's dreams, Amir: a long-bearded maulvi frequently appears in his dreams; Tipu goes to Mecca on a pilgrimage; Prophet Mohammad tells a long-bearded Arab, 'Tell Tipu that I shall not enter Heaven without him'; Tipu is then on a mission to convert all non-Muslims to Islam and Islamize all non-Islamic nations.

I've read the whole thing. Tipu never talks about modernizing India and fumes that the Christians (British) are his biggest obstacle that he must urgently remove. What's funny is that based on these very papers, our Progressives call him the forefather of Indian technology, a role model of secularism and the progenitor of Progressiveness! How they can claim the exact opposite using the same papers is a question these intellectuals need to answer.

Tipu, who embarked on a long campaign to Malabar and Coorg and left a brutal trail of forcible conversion in its wake, refrained from

trying a similar stunt in the Mysore region because he was shrewd enough to realize that it wouldn't work here—the odds were just too enormous. In a move to placate the Hindus here—actually, he needed their support after his financial humiliation in the Third Mysore War of 1791, which was when he had to submit his two sons to the British—he gave a large donation to the Sringeri Shankaracharya Mutt. Our secular-progressives uphold this as an instance of Tipu's non-sectarian noble quality. But there's tons of evidence on the other side: Tipu actually wrote to the Afghan king Zaman Shah and the caliph of Turkey to invade India and establish the rule of Islam. In his infamous sack of the Mysore palace in 1796, he rounded up the entire library containing invaluable ancient Hindu palm-leaf manuscripts, inscriptions, papers and books and had them all burnt as fuel.

His 'reform' in education is another mark of his supposed progressiveness. The Muslims in Malabar speak, read and write Malayalam even today like the Tamil Muslims in Tamil Nadu do in Tamil. Thanks to Tipu, Muslims in Karnataka speak only Urdu. This is the direct result of Tipu's insistence that Farsi and Urdu remain the only permitted mediums of instruction.

This letter is already far too lengthy, I know, but the point is, I can't write the script showing Tipu for what he was not. Several letters that he had written to his military officers ordering the capture and conversion of Hindus in his kingdom are still available. All of these show enough and more evidence of Tipu's cruelty, bigotry and a savage disregard for the original rulers of Mysore. It is simply impossible to ignore this kind of proof and the more I research, the more I discover newer evidence of his brutal side. I don't want to list them all here but I trust you understand my difficulty. If I write this play showing Tipu as a national hero, I'll be lying to the whole world and to myself.

I need your help, Amir.

Lots of love,
Bibi

She waited for more than a month. He didn't reply. She knew when she wrote the letter that it would displease him. But for her, it was a question of being

truthful to her art. And she had married him because he was equally passionate about art, forsaking her religion and her father. Now after twenty-eight years of living together, she had no one to turn to, to share her crisis, to tell all, to hide nothing…and suddenly, for no reason, she remembered her father, who had been both a mother and a father to her. *What was Amir thinking? He could have scribbled a line asking me to come to Bangalore to discuss my letter if he felt awkward to come here. But nothing. Not even a 'received your letter' response. Silent snub. He's showing his contempt. Neglect.*

She was furious. Two days letter, she decided to go to Bangalore.

He was home. He opened the door and let her in. She broke the silence by joking about his weight gain, and then embraced him warmly from behind the chair he was sitting on. He grunted his response. Her patience wore off. She pulled up a chair opposite him, looked him directly in the eyes and retold all that she had written.

'We aren't debating history. We're doing a play,' he said curtly.

'But this play involves historical characters,' she almost shouted without realizing it.

'That's an artist's freedom!' he matched her pitch.

'Oh, I'm all for artistic freedom but that freedom is only meaningful if the work is the artist's original creation. The moment you use it to propagate your ideology, you stop being an artist.'

'And your hatred for Islam has increased lately!'

'How irrational can you get? Why can't you recall how many times we've spoken about how artists are beyond religion? I think truth is greater than art, and an artist's creation must be an expression of truth. I think—I'm convinced that using art for any other purpose is backstabbing art.'

She was shocked by the force of her own speech. She couldn't believe she had said all that. Suddenly she experienced a strange sense of elevation that felt good. Amir was still upset. He went out to the balcony and lit a cigarette. *What's wrong with her? She's stuck in that stupid village reading her father's books. Why? She's neglecting her wifely duties. What am I supposed to do here?* And he remembered. *She wants me to join her there, in that village!* He couldn't dream of spending even a night in that hellhole. *And she said she lives like a Hindu there, wearing that bindi just like…like the Hindus wear. Oh! And it was so easy for her to ask me to stay with her in her father's house. Amir, husband of a Hindu woman…damn! How could she understand*

how embarrassing…inadequate it would make me feel. He was boiling now.

‘Dinner is on the table, sahib,’ Amina Banu’s voice brought him back.

‘Okay. Go home now,’ he said and then sat on the chair in the balcony.

A long time afterwards, Razia came to him. ‘Let’s eat.’

‘Please go. I want to be alone,’ he said without looking at her.

She came closer, ‘I’ve come from so far and it’s been so long…’

‘I’m used to staying alone and…and I like it now. Please, don’t disturb me,’ he said, purposely turning his head away from her.

She felt slighted and left. There was no point pacifying him. Her last visit had shown her how difficult the task was. She was very hungry and sat at the table but couldn’t get herself to eat alone. She stared at the dishes blankly and recalled an incident that had occurred four months ago. It was her first visit to Bangalore after she had gone to Narasapura and later to Sangama to immerse her father’s ashes. She and Amir had just been about to start dinner when she had opened the lid of the vessel to serve the curry but stopped midway—she couldn’t tell by looking whether the curry was beef. Amina had cut the meat neatly and cooked it to a fine tenderness. The only way to find out was to taste it.

‘Amir, can you taste this a bit and tell me if it’s beef?’

‘Why?’

‘I no longer eat beef.’

He had stared at her for a long time, looking as though he was talking to himself. Then, tauntingly, ‘May I ask you why you’ve adopted this retrograde step?’

She had ignored the taunt. ‘I’m my father’s only daughter. I wasn’t present when his last rites were performed and all I could do was immerse his ashes in the river. To do that, I had to atone for the sin of eating beef. Part of the atonement ritual was to take an oath that I’ll never eat beef again.’

He had just stared at her. She had remembered his other argument during the tension-filled days when they were living in his parents’ home. Each time he had pressed her to eat beef, she would counter it with, ‘Why don’t you eat pork?’ And then she had sensed he’d revive that same argument. After sometime, he had said, ‘Fine! But in that case, you need to give up eating meat entirely. You can’t argue for a special status for cows without sounding hypocritical.’

It had made sense. And then she had recalled that her Gandhian father was a staunch vegetarian. As long as he was alive and now, even after he was

gone, Lakshmamma and Kenchappa continued to respect his strictly vegetarian lifestyle. They didn't cook meat at home.

'Amir, you're right. Ever since I've been in Narasapura, I've not touched meat. And yes, food is a question of individual choice. But there *is* such a thing as showing kindness to animals—honouring their right to live. If you look at it that way, vegetarianism stands on a higher plane. Which is why I've decided to give up eating meat. Even when I come here,' she had replied with a tone of finality.

'Oh? If we're so different in something as basic as food, how do you sustain one of the main bonds that make this marriage?'

'You become a vegetarian.'

'But God has created animals so that man can eat them. Right?'

'This kind of reasoning stems from deep-rooted arrogance. And any religion that reinforces it is arrogant to the same extent.'

The conversation had ended there. She hadn't eaten the curry. Her dinner that night was just rotis dipped in curd. *The consequence of our earlier argument had shown itself in bed later that night—we simply lay next to each other. I thought the newfound difference in food had diminished the sense of oneness between us.*

And now she continued to stare at the dining table. Nobody had instructed Amina to prepare vegetarian food for her separately. And Lakshmi wasn't sure what she had cooked. She didn't have a heart to eat alone, without him. He was still sulking, sitting there in the balcony, smoking. She went to the bedroom, lay on the bed and waited for him for interminable minutes. He didn't come. She decided not to call him. She sighed and closed her eyes. It wasn't just her newfound vegetarianism that upset him so. Hampi…the sight of the broken Virupaksha idol, the destroyed temples and now, her letter detailing Tipu's atrocities…he must be fuming. But she couldn't pretend that all of that was not true. *Why is he so rigid? Can't he see the truth for what it is?*

When she opened her eyes, she could see the sunlight softly illuminating the room from behind the semi-transparent window drapes. She couldn't remember when she had finally fallen asleep. She was alone on the bed. She wanted to weep. So he was purposely distancing himself. She got up and a few minutes later, stepped into the living room, moving towards the dining table. Amir had already eaten and he hadn't called her to join him. She climbed the staircase that led to Nazir's room. The door was half-shut. She

pushed it open. Amir was lying on his back, smoking.

‘Why did you sleep here?’

He didn’t look at her. ‘Sorry, I forgot to tell Amina to cook vegetarian food for you whenever you come here.’

‘That’s okay. I’ll tell her myself. You don’t need to turn vegetarian for my sake. But you didn’t answer my question: why did you sleep here?’

Now he turned his face away from her pointedly. ‘I realized there’s nothing a vegetarian woman can offer me.’

‘Amir! That’s vulgar! Is that how you saw me all these years? I’m your wife.’ Her voice was shrill, trembling with rage.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound vulgar.’ He paused, looked at her and continued, ‘Here’s the thing: only a vegetarian woman can stay apart from her husband for months at a stretch.’ The triumph in his tone jarred her. She glared at him, wanting to retaliate, but turned back and left the room.

5

Around ten in the morning, Kenchappa entered Razia's study and gave her an envelope. Razia was surprised to know that there was actually a post office in her village.

'Since when do you have a post office here?'

'It's been seven–eight years, amma.'

Not bad. She looked at the envelope. It was addressed to her in Kannada. She couldn't recognize the handwriting and there was no return address. She tore it open and extracted the letter written in English. Professor Sastri. She felt happy.

My dear Lakshmi,

I'm writing to you for the first time in my life. Think of it. There was neither reason nor opportunity to actually write a letter to you all these years. What name do I call you? Shall I call you Lakshmi or shall I call you Razia? To me, both are beautiful names.

I was abroad and returned two weeks ago. I met Amir last Saturday. He told me in quite some detail about how you have changed. But I can sense what you're going through. Ever since you saw the Hampi ruins, you've become sentimental, and you've uncritically accepted the lies written by communal historians. This sentimentality is what is preventing you from proceeding with the script. You were such an ideal couple—there was no film you did not do together. And now this? Amir had to get someone else to write the Hampi script? I'm disappointed…no! I'm pained. Terribly hurt.

The true history of Hampi—of the entire Vijayanagar Empire—is far more complex than the imaginary tales that these 'historians' narrate. The Vijayanagar Empire invited its destruction upon itself; the Muslims did nothing. I agree that some Muslim kings destroyed

Hindu temples and idols, but they were aberrations, acts of revenge. Even Hindu kings were not as tolerant as most believe. I don't know if you've been following recent historical research. You'll be shocked to learn that the Vijayanagar Empire witnessed some of the most barbaric strife between the Shaiva and Vaishnava sects. Rivers of blood flowed as a result. All the disfigured idols and ruined temples that pained you so deeply—all, all of them are dedicated to Vishnu. In other words, they were built by the followers of the Vaishnava sect. The Lakshmi Narasimha and Vijaya Vittala temples are just two very prominent surviving examples of the hundreds of Vishnu temples that were demolished. But did you ask why the Virupaksha temple still stands intact with not so much as a scratch on it? Virupaksha is Shiva, the god of the Shaiva sect. What does it say? The Vaishnava followers had immense backing from the powerful leaders at Tirupati, which was how they managed to oppress the Shaivas. I really don't need to tell you that Tirupati is in Andhra Pradesh but I'll say it because if you look at it, doesn't this also mean that the people of Andhra Pradesh oppressed these Shaivas in the Vijayanagar Empire? And Lakshmi, this oppression didn't last for a few years. It was prolonged over a hundred years. How long could the poor Shaivas tolerate this? When they decided that enough was enough, they invited the neighbouring Muslim kings and showed them all the vulnerable spots they could attack in Vijayanagar. These Muslim kings agreed because the temptation of seizing Vijayanagar's enormous wealth was irresistible. And so, when war broke out, it was the perfect time for the long-suffering Shaivas to destroy as many Vishnu temples and idols as they could. But how do our communal 'historians' narrate this? They blame all this temple-idol destruction on the Muslim kings.

I'm proud of your newfound interest in studying history. I'll introduce you to solid Progressive historians. They'll happily guide you. And you know I'm always there for you. Actually, now that I say this, I think you have the discipline and commitment to study the history of not just Vijayanagar but the whole of India. But don't ever forget that the goal of history is to enable the forward march of humanity towards Progressiveness.

Yours lovingly,

N.S.N

She folded the letter, put it down on the bed and thought for a few minutes. It was trademark Professor Sastri. She admitted that it contained specific points that provoked closer attention. But then she had almost abandoned the idea of a Progressive history. She thought hard. Actually, there was nothing like Progressive history, she concluded, suddenly recalling her research on Tipu Sultan, and her father's copious notes. What was history then? She inserted the letter back into the envelope and idly threw it on the study table. She read it again the next day and suddenly recalled a note her father had made. *History is a quest for truth.* These words filled her mind. She knew almost nothing about Hampi or the history of the Vijayanagar Empire and Professor Sastri's history of the empire wasn't convincing. She decided to study Vijayanagar in depth and then ask the professor to introduce her to his Progressive historians and hear out what they had to say.

She began to rummage through her father's collection. She was sure there'd be at least a few authoritative histories on the Vijayanagar Empire. Sewell's *A Forgotten Empire* stood on the topmost rack of the third bookshelf. She pulled it out. *Where have I seen this book before? Ah! In Hampi. But where?* And it slowly came to her. It was in a local bookstore in the narrow street right opposite the Virupaksha temple. But she hadn't bought it because working towards a deadline on a documentary, she didn't have the time or the patience to read something like that. *No. I hadn't known the extent of my father's self-earned scholarship back then.* She opened *A Forgotten Empire's* cover page to find a thick wad of papers folded inside. *Father's notes.* They threw additional light on her father's approach to study. She recalled seeing similarly folded, handwritten papers in most of the other books she had read. Without opening them, she knew what they contained—eight or ten pages of notes summarizing the entire book. She looked at the neighbouring books on the same row. Srinivasa Ritti and B. Gopal's *A History of Karnataka*; N.Venkataramanayya's *The Delhi Sultanate*; Suryanath Kamath's *A Concise History of Karnataka*; P.B. Desai's *Karnataka Through the Ages*. She suddenly felt puny, ashamed. *How did I agree to do that documentary without reading any of these? And how did I let Amir convince me that two tourist booklets gave us everything we needed to know about Hampi?* She decided to read them all from the very beginning, together with her father's notes.

Back at her desk, she began reading her father's notes on *A Forgotten Empire*.

> The question of whether history has a goal is one that falls in the domain of philosophy and rides on the back of logic. But the study of history has a definite goal: the search for truth. Digging into primary sources and records, classifying and categorizing them and then giving them a shape that is both faithful to the facts unearthed and is logically consistent is a painstaking task. However, in modern times, especially post-Independence, historians have devised innovative interpretations of Indian history, which now qualify as authentic history. Overcoming such interpretations is harder. This applies equally to the 'history' of Hampi. This history tells us that Hampi's magnificent temples were destroyed and the idols there were smashed because of violent strife between the Vaishnava and Shaiva sects, and that the neighbouring Muslim kingdoms had nothing to do with it. As evidence, these histories tell us that all the destroyed idols and temples belong to Vaishnavas. They also assert that the powerful forces located outside, in Andhra Pradesh, with the backing of the powerful Vaishnavas at Tirupati, had persecuted the Shaivas of Karnataka for long years. The Shaivas finally rebelled and sought the aid of Muslim kings, which resulted in a massive war during which they destroyed the temples of the Vaishnavas. This 'history' is a ploy to whitewash the religious fanaticism of Muslim kings. But what the writers of this 'history' don't understand is how their own interpretation shows the people of Karnataka in poor light—it implies that the people of Karnataka and Shaivas, specifically, indulged in acts of such heinous vandalism. In any case, this history is untrue.
>
> In its two-hundred-plus years of history, the Vijayanagar Empire saw rulers who belonged to both the Vaishnava and Shiva sects. How did a ruler treat subjects belonging to the other sect? Did a Vaishnava ruler persecute his Shaiva citizens? I've read almost everything there is related to this and I spent many weeks at Hampi and toured the general region of the Vijayanagar Empire's site on foot. My first-hand observations tally very accurately with George Michael and Philip Wagoner's definitive *Vijayanagara: Architectural Inventory of the Sacred Shrine*. The third volume of the work shows photographs of

both Shiva and Vishnu temples destroyed in Hampi. A brief list for ready reference of the disfigured Shiva temples:

- Chandramouleshwara temple—Plates 20, 21—Mutilated.
- Soumya Someshwara temple—Plates 67, 68, 69—Mutilated.
- Linga-Shiva temple—Plate 329—Mutilated.
- Chandikeshwara temple—Plates 352, 353—Mutilated.
- Veerabhadra temple complex—Plates 390, 391, 392—Mutilated.
- Virupaksha temple on top of the Hemakuta hill (reportedly, the 'original' Virupaksha)—Plate 520—Mutilated.
- Apart from temples, the cave and the matt of the Shaiva saint-poet, Chaamarasa, have been thoroughly disfigured.
- The Anantashayana temple, dedicated to Vishnu, and the Shiva temple —Mallappana Gudi—on the Hospet–Hampi stretch are mutilated.
- On the Someshwara hill off-road the Hospet–Anegondi highway, the Someshwara cave-temple built for Shiva has been destroyed.
- The Shiva temple inside the 'Kings' Cave' behind the Virupaksha temple complex shows us the extent of damage—the scaffolding holding the lingam and the Nandi idol, Shiva's vehicle, stands orphaned.

This is just a partial list but it's enough to show how incorrect the Shaiva–Vaishnava conflict theories are. But the innovation of history doesn't stop there. It holds the fact of the Shiva temple destruction as another evidence of the barbaric nature of the Shaiva–Vaishnava conflict! It is, therefore, important to examine the attitudes and behaviour of the Vijayanagar kings first-hand:

1. The tower of the Virupaksha temple was built by Krishnadevaraya, a devout Vaishnava.
2. The magnificient Vijaya Vittala temple dedicated to Vishnu was built by Devaraya II, a Shaiva.
3. The Ramachandra temple, also used as a private temple by the royal family, was commissioned and completed by Devaraya I, a Shaiva. *The Ramachandra Temple at Vijayanagara*, co-authored by Anna L.

Dallapiccola and John M. Fritz, is an exhaustive study of this temple.

> The Virupaksha temple continues to be functional even today and largely remains intact. Based on my study, I find it reasonable to conclude that this happened because of a concerted effort on the part of ordinary people who fought the Muslims so they could preserve the founding deity of the Vijayanagar Empire.

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This was enough. Lakshmi began to devour everything that was available on the history of the Vijayanagar Empire in her father's library. She made notes meticulously and added her own findings to her father's notes. She went to Bangalore and read the books her father had listed in his bibliography and under 'additional reading'. After her work at Bangalore was done, she took the train to Hospet and found her way to Hampi again. She examined the entire region mostly on foot, like her father had. At the end of two weeks, she began to feel confident that she had a complete grasp over the history of the Vijayanagar Empire. *Should I make an independent film on the story of this glorious civilization's heart-rending destruction?* She spent an entire day harbouring this dreamlike thought.

When she returned to Bangalore the day after, she called Professor Sastri.

'Sir, I got your letter four months ago. Sorry I couldn't respond earlier. I was busy researching the history of the Vijayanagar Empire that you had mentioned in your letter…you know, about the Shaiva–Vaishnava clash that wiped out the empire. And now I'm calling to tell you that that explanation does not hold. My findings tell me that it was the neighbouring Muslim kings who destroyed all those temples and idols. And now I'm ready to debate on this with the Progressive historians that you mentioned. Can you introduce me to them?'

There was a long pause before he spoke. The surprise was very evident in his voice. 'What…what historians are you talking about?'

'In your letter…remember, sir? You asked me not to trust the sentimental stories of the communal historians…'

'Oh! Lakshmi, Lakshmi! So this is the thing. You're an artist. How could you do this? Imagine what's going to happen if all artists immerse themselves in research and stuff? Art will wilt and wither. And you are a very gifted

artist. It's good to know you took pains to research but do you realize that your creativity has withered over these four months? It's tragic, personally…I mean, *my* favourite student murdering her creativity with her own hands! Look, I'm sorry, but I have to catch a flight for Berlin in the evening…some conference. And look at me! I've not even started packing. We'll talk in detail when I'm back. You take care, okay? Goodbye!' He disconnected the phone without waiting for her response.

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She went to Narasapura directly. She wanted some time alone, to think.

*Father's notes make sense, now that I've studied most of the volumes in his collection. I guess I needed this preparation to fully understand the scope of his study, to comprehend his questions and doubts in the same sense. What has he accomplished and what have I? He worked hard to improve his English. And he's not used a single English word incorrectly—precise, sharp, accurate in usage and meaning, like a dictionary. His Kannada, his language of thought, speech and writing is flawless…*She felt a stab of shame. *Razia Querishi. Feminist. Progressive. Egalitarian. Potent combination of courage, rationality, scientific temper and the rest. Labels, all of them. Given by people who assigned it to themselves and doled it out to their followers and peers. Like me. How many rallies and demonstrations and marches and slogans? Every one of them shriller than the previous…showpieces…only we had the keys to history and the secret to change the course of the future. Intoxicating…empty. Despite all this, why couldn't I study history like this? And suddenly it struck me. History is not tied to slogans and ideals and reform movements. It is to rid ourselves of notions of doctrines and movements and look at the incidents of the past as they actually happened. And this can't happen unless we allow our minds to be cleared of the illusions created by the present. The past reveals its true self to us through… books, signs, symbols and mutilated relics and yet we insist on seeing only a twisted version of it, because our eyes are jaundiced by the present. Especially at the present time, when a historian needs to fight with others belonging to his creed, instead of focusing on the actual subject of his quest. Things like the 'goal of history' is something that stems from arrogance and those who claim to provide answers to this question are doubly arrogant. Enormous and rapid advances in science and technology have reshaped*

societies across the world, which is becoming smaller, narrower every day. The basis of ethics, thought, behaviour and conduct are undergoing reinterpretation. Several countries are armed with nuclear bombs, people are exploring the possibility of settling on other planets…and our Professor Sastri still talks about the goal of history.

She laughed at the last thought.

I can't write the book that Father had planned to write. It'll be a different book; it'll be my book. I'm his daughter but it still won't be the same book. The choice of details, interpretation, reasoning, emotions, expression—everything will be unique because we give them the shape according to how we've digested our learning. Besides, there's a fundamental difference between us. I don't have his dedication to undertake steady, scholarly work. His mind was methodical. It carefully weighed and analyzed events, facts and people. Where he lacked imagination, creativity, I see stories… I can leap through imagination and inject feeling into seemingly meaningless symbols through images and metaphors. It's why I became an artist and I've done this all my life and I know no other way… My world is the world of feeling. And I've wasted my life mortgaging this talent in the service of some social reform movement that no longer makes sense to me.

I can't write a scholarly work of history complete with references and footnotes. At best, I can write fiction. Or if I had the money, make such a movie. But I need to prepare more. I need to read more, travel to every corner of India, take photographs and do fieldwork with only this intent.

And I began to write furiously…

6

Rage burns like an inferno inside me. I find no peace if it doesn't burn. It burns when I'm awake and it takes the shape of searing dreams when I'm sleeping and if the dream ends abruptly, I wake up and I can't sleep again. What has happened to me? Is my mind diseased? I must ask the all-knowing Haji Hamdullah Sahib. He has the history of the whole world from the ancient times till the present day on the tip of his tongue. He recites everything from memory…tales of Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Khurasan, Iran, Turan, Afghanistan…many, many more lands than I can possibly hope to know about. No other scholar is equal to him. Badshah Aurangzeb recognized Hamdullah Sahib's value and appointed him as the custodian of archives, which are securely preserved in a heavily-guarded fortress. But Hamdullah Sahib extended his labours beyond official duties. The subaas and spies brought all kinds of secret information from every corner of the imperial Mughal Empire that was spread across Hindustan. The badshah examined each report meticulously, set aside only such information that didn't present any danger to his empire and then sent them to Hamdullah Sahib who in turn read all of this and classified them subject-wise. Hamdullah Sahib has exceptional affection for me. His mercy is immense—I can walk into his room at any time I please and no guard dares stop me. Each time I meet him I see how his eyes shine the moment he sees me. But the burning doesn't go away. I remember his words the last time I met him, 'Burning means fire. Fire means hell. So it is actually the fear of hell that haunts you in all your three states—when you are awake, when you are sleeping and when you dream. And if the fear of hell haunts you, it means the Prophet's (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) bountiful grace is not yet fully upon you. Do your namaz with greater devotion. Read the Koran with more faith and read it more often. Can you read Arabic? Oh no, I know you can't. And that's why I think you are unable to fully understand the Koran. Anybody who doesn't know Arabic can't claim to fully understand the Koran…not just

understanding its meaning…to fully understand the Koran means to understand its essence, its sentiment. See, Farsi maybe the imperial language but Arabic is God's language, the Prophet's (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) language. But I think your problem is more fundamental. You still have some roots of your original ignorance, your Hindu beliefs and until you burn them completely to ashes, your fear of hellfire will continue to torment you.'

I had listened to him, looking at his face intently, my respect for him growing with each line he uttered.

'I'm convinced that what you say is very correct, Haji Sahib. I will tell you the visions that come to my mind each time I am consumed with fury. I see the temples and the temple towers and the idols of the gods and goddesses and the rituals conducted by the priests, and I hear the sounds of the prayers and many other things from my previous faith.'

'Why do you call it your previous faith? If you call it a faith, it means you are comparing it with Islam, and that means you are insulting Islam, the Only True Faith! It is correct to call them ignorant practices and dark beliefs.'

He was right, of course. This is the true reason for my anger. I'm a slave. I was captured in the battle and I had converted to Islam to save my life. In spite of converting, I became a slave and I continue to be a slave and not just merely a slave…I am…I am…worse than a slave…and I'm ashamed to admit to myself what I really am. And my previous faith is responsible for my present state. Hamdullah Sahib is right. It is a weak faith. If it was powerful, would it be defeated so easily? Hamdullah Sahib is very kind and very patient. He never loses his temper when he talks about faith. How methodically he explained on another occasion: 'Khwaja Jahan, it is true, Islam came to Hindustan from outside. Hajjaj, Ghazni, Ghori, Mamulk, Khalji, Tughlaq, Sayyid, Lodi, Mughal…the list is very long…when every single one of these kings invaded Hindustan, what did your Hindus do? They died like flies…well, I said "your Hindus" but I was wrong—I meant to say "Hindus" because you're our own now. It is true they all came from outside and waged war in a very large country with great manpower, military, resources and money. The Hindus challenged them with all their might in hundreds of battles but they all, one after the other, were defeated and captured and lakhs of Hindus were slaughtered and their kings subjugated to Islam. Their gigantic stone temples standing tall all over Hindustan and all their god-idols were razed to dust. Why? Because the faith that stands on the foundations of ignorance is not a true faith. Just like the sun melts away

darkness when he rises, all their power, and their gods and their temples burned down in the face of the brilliance of Islam. Their ulemas—the ones who roam around with heads shaved except for a few strands of hair in the middle and wear thin bands of vermilion and saffron on their foreheads say —"Truth alone wins in the end…" What is that in their language?'

The Sanskrit verse had emerged from my lips involuntarily, '*Satyameva Jayate Naanrutam*'.

'Kafir! Kafir! That is the kafir tongue and only kafir tongues can pronounce it!' He had paused for a bit before continuing, 'Anyway, those kafir ulemas are correct. Truth alone wins. Because Islam is Truth, it could conquer this vast Hindustan and establish its rule here. Do you understand now?' He had smiled broadly as he slowly stroked his silvery beard.

It wasn't just Haji Hamdullah's narration of Islam's history that had convinced me—it was the concrete expression of the truth of my own experience. To save his kingdom, the powerful king of Amber married off his daughter to Akbar Badshah and agreed to become a general of sorts to Akbar Badshah. This mighty Mansingh was then deputed by the Badshah to launch an attack against the valiant Maharana Pratap who refused a similar offer to make his kingdom, Udaipur, a feudatory of the Mughal Empire. Mansingh personally met Maharana Pratap and tried to dissuade him: Akbar was invincible. He hadn't lost a single war and the enemy that would defeat him was not yet born and wouldn't ever be born. Maharana Pratap listened to his counsel, treated him with great respect, but refused to agree to become a mere underling under Akbar. In the Haldighati battle, Maharana Pratap was severely defeated and he escaped into the surrounding forests, where he lived with the tribals almost like one of them.

Akbar Badshah's rule was everywhere… The whole of Sind and Malwa and Gujarat were already under Muslim kings since long past. Despite this, tiny Devagarh hidden inside the impenetrable Aravali had escaped notice of the Muslim kings and generals till then. Densely forested mountain ranges hid it from view. It wasn't near any highway and it wasn't strategic to the defence of any other fort. I guess this was why Muslim kings and generals were unaware of its existence. Until Aurangzeb Badshah sent a hukum, the Imperial Order, to my Most Respected Father, Maharaja Jagavir Singh. It was an 'invitation' to surrender Devagarh and accept Islam as the Only True Faith. What was left unsaid was happening outside our fort. Hordes of men on battle-trained mammoths ramming the entrance repeatedly and cannons

aimed at our fort blasting away at the walls from all directions. My Respected Father was a very skilful diplomat who knew how to give a nuanced response to a monarch like Aurangzeb Badshah, saying something like he was a mere ant living under the graces provided by the badshah. But even to him, a pure-blooded Rajput warrior, it was unthinkable to ponder on nuanced responses when it was clear that the badshah was asking him to throw open his fort gates and surrender without a whimper. I noticed with great shock that the badshah's army, which was now throttling Devagarh's fort from all sides, consisted mostly of Hindus—our own Rajput peasants, Jats, and Malwas. I wondered at their complete lack of commonsense—they were helping the Muslim army fight and take down one of their own. The badshah's sword-wielding horsemen were Rajputs. Their commanders were Rajputs. The rest—at least half of the army—consisted of Afghan Muslims. I learned only later that these Afghan warriors were sent to ensure that the loyalty of the Hindu cavalry really lay with the badshah. The foot soldiers didn't actually know why they were fighting this battle but they were helpless because they had been forcibly rounded up like cattle by the badshah's men and compelled to fight. We couldn't hold out for long against the badshah's imposing and seemingly endless supply of forces. After all he was the badshah of the whole of Hindustan.

My Most Respected Father called an immediate assembly of his ministers, generals and prominent citizens. He spoke in a firm, decisive tone: 'The western side of the fort has cracked. By evening it'll break completely and their men will surge inside. We have three options. The first is to throw the door open, charge forth with our army and kill as many of them as we can and then attain the certain warrior's death that will be our fate. The second is to wait till they get in and then give them their fiercest battle yet before we embrace glorious death. The last way is to throw the door open, go down on our knees, surrender and convert to their faith and save our lives by betraying the faith that has sustained us from very ancient times. You're free to choose what you think is the best option, but let the decision be one by which we all will abide. Let not each man pick his own way. It will lead to confusion and avoidable deaths. We fight and die together or live together or surrender together. We don't have time for a detailed discussion. Let's reach a decision quickly.'

The commander-in-chief, Vijayendra Simha, stood up and thundered, 'We understood the purpose of this meeting when His Highness called for us.

We have, amongst us, reached a decision. If His Highness permits…'

My Most Respected Father gestured him to continue,

'…the womenfolk will commit mass jauhar by jumping into lit pyres. The men wielding naked swords will throw open the main gates, and with a thunderous battle cry of "Har Har Mahadev", chop off as many enemy heads as possible before surrendering to a death befitting heroes!'

'Have all the womenfolk agreed to commit jauhar?'

'Her Highness, the queen, has already assented. We know what the enemy will do to the women they capture in war. They will enjoy women according to their rank—their high-ranking generals and commanders enjoy our women of royalty and their foot soldiers take our ordinary women. And eventually all our women will become their slaves, maidservants and prostitutes. Our women are ready to embrace death rather than be dishonoured. Our men, whether they surrender or are captured, will undergo the same fate—they will be converted to the faith of our enemy and they will live the rest of their lives either as slaves or as foot soldiers. Many will be carted off to be auctioned like cattle. From there, they will follow the person who buys them and become his slave for life. I have heard that they travel to far-off places and some even cross the Hindu Kush Mountains to go to even farther lands. Sometimes, they are sold again in slave markets in those lands. Your Highness, it is far more preferable for us to give battle and die. Everybody agrees with this.'

And so a final decision was reached: we wouldn't charge out. We would just open the main gates of the fort to encourage entry and from strategic locations, slice their heads off. Each strategic location would be manned by an independent commander with a dedicated unit, free to take his own decision. This, we knew, would not ensure us victory but we had a very good chance of killing as many as possible. We would open the main door after the womenfolk had committed jahuar. My Venerable Mother, my elder sister, my wife, all the women of the royal family—all the women in the fort were preparing themselves for jauhar. There was more than enough dry wood stored inside the fort.

And then the wartime responsibilities were assigned to each. I was in charge of guarding the temple of our kingdom's chief deity, Lord Vishnu. My Honourable Father would guard the palace. But the thought of my mother, sister, and my new bride Princess Shyamala Devi jumping into the pyre made my blood boil…*my* Shyamala Devi, with all the innocence of a fifteen year

old girl. I was supposed to be the guardian of all these women. A prince is a representative of the king, a father figure responsible for protecting the lives of everybody. My rage turned to anguish when I realized that I was not actually protecting them, but merely following the king's order to stand watch as the women willingly burned themselves to death. After witnessing this, I had to go forth and give battle and eventually join the women by dying at the hands of the enemy. It made me feel like a eunuch.

This enemy was determined and infinitely powerful—he would take us at will, either by demanding our submission or ensuring our total annihilation. We had no allies. None would come to our aid. And then I recalled what we had done over the past three months: we had sat and sort of expected their arrival. This inertia in itself appeared now as a sort of eunuch-like behaviour. But then, I had also heard stories of how every fort and tiny kingdom like ours reacted in similar situations. The same inertia. The same helpless anticipation of death, like goats lined up at the sacrificial gallows.

I debated the idea of one last visit to the women's quarters. To prostrate at my Divine Mother's feet one last time, to make a last salutation to my elder sister, to seek the final blessing from my grandmother…to lock my sweet bride in a final embrace, to experience her sweetness one more time… But this thought seemed so absurdly ridiculous that I felt slightly ashamed of being overcome with sentimentality unbecoming of an heir apparent. It didn't matter that I was just seventeen. I was proud of the military training I had undergone ever since I could remember. Wasn't Abhimanyu just sixteen when he fought seasoned veterans and died a hero's death? If I died in this war, I wanted to die Abhimanyu's death.

I circled the Vishnu temple once and worked out a solid defence plan. Three hundred foot soldiers would surround the temple in concentric circles. One hundred horsemen with swords drawn and ready would wait in hiding at strategic places both outside and inside the temple complex. Further inside the temple complex, another hundred foot soldiers would spread themselves out, concealed behind the huge pillars and various doors. The rest of the force would wait inside the sanctum sanctorum. Every inch of the temple was protected. The attackers would first charge on the foot soldiers but would be cruelly ambushed from behind by my warriors on horseback.

Minutes later, I saw faint streaks of grey smoke rising from the direction of the palace—jauhar had begun. The streaks gradually became thicker and darker and I could see stray sparks spurting up, along with shrill cries of 'Har

Har Mahadev', which rent the entire sky and turned into a continuous stream of screams of heroism and agony, reaching a pitch where it was impossible to tell the difference between pain and sacrifice.

In my mind, the order was already worked out. The first to enter the pyre was the queen, my Beloved Mother, followed by the other women of the royal family. After this, the rest of the women in the fort followed suit. I could not take my eyes away from the sky, now a thick, black vaporous mass, which took with it my Divine Mother, my lovely young wife, my sister and my grandmother as it swirled upwards. I felt sick to my stomach. And with it came the realization that there was no turning back. Most of our women were either dead or dying. Even if we won, there was no meaning left in living life anymore. Victory was also death. Strangely, this last thought fired me. *Kill them all!*

Suddenly the air was rent with cries of 'Har Har Mahadev' emanating from the direction of the main gates. Ah! They've thrown the gates open! Just as suddenly there was silence. And then the explosion of war cries almost shook me. The enemy was in! I banged my fist into my palm. As much as I was compelled by instinct to rush over and unleash my prowess over those filthy dogs, I remained fixed at my position. I began making calculations in my mind. Their first target was definitely the main palace and then this temple. I mounted my trusted steed, his name synonymous with victory, Vijaya. I drew my sword from its scabbard, held its gold-crusted handle tightly and examined its deadly, gleaming length. Wait. They could very easily split their force and send contingents to take different parts of our fort. I waited for what seemed like hours, proud that my hands didn't ache from holding the sword for so long while continuous shrieks emanated from the direction of the palace. The war was raging in full fury. I felt proud again. My heroic father, an extraordinary warrior, wouldn't give up that easily. I had seen him in practice sessions. A mere swing of his diamond-handled sword was enough to make the opponent spit his heart out.

I heard the sound of hoofs to my left and turned as one of our messengers halted his horse next to me and conveyed the news. 'Praise the prince! I come with good news. His Highness, the Most Esteemed Maharaja Jagavir Singh, gave a fierce battle to the enemy and attained the warrior's heaven. The enemy has captured the palace. Jauhar is complete. All the womenfolk have attained heaven.'

I trembled inwardly and saw that he noticed my trembling lips. What do I

do now? I slowly turned around and looked at the Vishnu temple that I had sworn to defend with my life. It was hopeless. Lord Vishnu, the Protector and Upholder of the Universe, had abandoned us. I could see the idol of Lord Vishnu fully. He hadn't changed. He greeted me even now with the same calm smile from the sanctum sanctorum. Four arms—a conch, discus, mace, and lotus in each hand. Lord Vishnu with his serene smile was very different from his two other counterparts, Brahma the Creator of the Universe and Shiva the Destroyer.

And then the noise of hoofs coming from behind as well as from the rear of the temple thrashed at my ears. I spun around and an exclamation escaped my lips as I first saw those gigantic Arabian steeds, then the ferocious-looking Afghan warriors staring down at me from atop those monster-horses. Raw power oozed from these fine beasts of war. I hesitated for a very brief moment before I roared 'Har Har Mahadev' and charged forth. We fought fiercely but they prevailed because their war technique was vastly superior, their strategy precise and they had the obvious advantage of greater numbers.

On their part, their horsemen, not foot soldiers, charged upon us first, giving them a calculated first advantage. I don't know whether it was a deliberate plan to capture me, the crown prince, alive or it was by accident, but I was hopelessly isolated from my men. My personal battle was over before it had begun—somebody lopped off my trusted Vijaya's foreleg, toppling me on to the ground. I rose swiftly, drew my dagger from its sheath but before I could plunge it into my stomach, I felt numerous hands roughly grabbing me from behind, flinging my knife away. They saw my sword with the golden hilt, my necklace and headgear—enough to identify me as the prince—and took me prisoner instead of killing me. Resistance was pointless. They removed their grip on me when they sensed this and one burly bear of a man searched me all over and extracted my sword. I was completely disarmed.

Suddenly an ear-splitting noise came from the right and I turned towards it. So they had entered the sanctum sanctorum. I could visualize the indiscriminate slaughter inside. I was sure that our men would've butchered a few of theirs but…I lost sense of time. I stood rooted to the ground, listening to the screams that never seemed to stop. I don't know how much time had elapsed before I saw the corpses and blood-dripping bodies being dragged out and piled in front of the temple in a heap. Some still alive were wriggling under the weight of the other bodies on them. All our men were finished. But

they had managed to take about thirty of their enemies.

Suddenly, there was a terrible noise. About seven to eight enemy warriors were dragging a massive boulder towards me with astonishing speed. They looked almost alike—the same formidable physical build, prominent beard, powerful chest and uniform breeches. They placed it near the pile of my dead men in a sort of a vertical position. Suddenly, horrifyingly I realized what it was—the idol of Lord Vishnu, the deity of the Devagarh kingdom, and its protector. Vishnu, the god who ensured that there was stability and prosperity in the whole world. I wanted to vomit. Suddenly I felt a hand on my left shoulder, pushing me roughly. It was Ijaz Ahamad Khan—I didn't know his name then—the leader of the contingent that had captured me. He was a mansabdaar, the commander of a unit of thousand soldiers, also a fact that I learned later. He was a stout, stocky man with a very wide chest, his cruel eyes full of hatred and bloodlust and with really thick eyebrows. As he pushed me, I noticed the enormous sword he wielded in his free hand. It was enough to chop off the head of a wild bison with a single swing. I was only seventeen but I had enough strength to free myself from the grip of this forty-year-old battle veteran. But the knowledge that I was already a prisoner surrounded by four armed soldiers sapped my courage. He dragged me near the idol, tightly gripping my right arm. Standing in front of it, he emitted a raucous laugh as one of his men handed him a giant crowbar. He looked at me meaningfully, lifted the crowbar high in the air and brought it down upon our deity in a mighty blow. The idol's nose was smashed instantly as I shuddered at the sacrilege. Then he turned his attention to the huge arms, pounding them repeatedly till they fell away from the body in broken bits. Like a man possessed he stamped on the massive stone chest several times before standing on it triumphantly as his men cheered in hellish glee.

Looking down at me from that height he spoke in that strange Hindustani tongue used by everybody in the Mughal army. 'You brought this upon yourself,' he taunted, 'by not surrendering to Islam when we sent the invitation to your foolish father! If you had accepted Merciful Islam before the war began, none of your people would have died. You would still have your life and freedom. Do you know your fate now? You are a prisoner! If you surrender to Islam, you will live, and you will not only become a Muslim, you will also become a slave! A slave, you fool! But if you refuse… here!' he roared, pointing at his sword, '*One* blow!' and violently raised it high in the air in one swoop, ready to strike.

I didn’t know at the time that the gesture was a mere threat. I was groomed in the Kshatriya tradition—a proud warrior prince taught never to be scared of death, in fact, to welcome death in battle. I could expertly wield almost every kind of weapon used in battle—sword, scimitar, spear, knives—and I could use them tactically and brutally. Every teacher who taught me invariably preached: remember always that your next step could be death. I was unafraid and I was proud. But I still do not know how those words instantly rushed out of my lips, ‘I accept Islam!’

To this day, I’ve pondered what unconscious prompting made me say that. And one thought keeps coming back to haunt me. When the Preserver and Protector of the World, the serene-faced Lord Vishnu…oh, how grand He looked in diamond-studded ornaments and yellow pure silk with exquisite lacework on it…this protector of the world, revered and worshipped by everybody, was violently uprooted from the innermost sanctum of His own temple, dragged and thrown beside the bloodied mass of dead bodies, disfigured. His chest stomped upon with slippered feet—yet, nothing happened! He just lay there helplessly before them, suffering the ignominy? And I was a mere mortal. What was the point in giving my life up for Him?

Did this reasoning work in the deep, dark recesses of my unconscious? Or did I, a prince trained strictly in Kshatriya Dharma, faced with the reality of certain death, choose life simply because I obeyed my survival instinct at that moment? Or was I fundamentally a coward, unworthy to be born as a Kshatriya? Whatever it may be, in that decisive moment I cast off the religion of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, the deities of Creation, Preservation and Destruction, and disowned my ancestors. Only one impression was clear as I faced the sword—I knew instinctively that Islam was a very virile faith. And ever since, I’ve been convinced that strength is religion and that nothing that is not strong can be called a religion.

By evening, the few who were still alive in the fort had joined the fold of Islam. Our conquerors rounded up the men and children separately, and away from the women who didn’t commit jauhar. I learned later that these women were carted away to far-off places like Delhi and from there to other places. But I wasn’t bundled with the men and children. I was taken to the mansabdaar, Ijaz Ahamad Khan’s camp, located about three to four miles outside the fort. Surprisingly, I was taken on horseback…perhaps because I was a prince? Or was it a concession because as a prince I had instantly accepted Islam upon seeing the raised sword? Then I was given an elaborate

bath, after which I was anointed with exquisite perfume. This was followed by a lavish spread. I couldn't bring myself to eat. I refused. Who can persuade himself to eat after witnessing his entire world slaughtered?

'The mansabdaar's order! You must eat. He'll arrive in a while,' said the soldier who supervised the entire ritual of my being pampered. I caught a hint of naughtiness in the way he smiled but I didn't understand its meaning. I ate as best as I could. A few moments later, I began to feel drowsy. I sat on the bed and allowed myself to doze.

Gentle movements all over my body jolted me awake. It was the mansabdaar's hands. I looked around. The tent was dark except for the soft light of oil-lit lamps. The mansabdaar was sitting very close to me, his thighs touching mine. Startled, I stood up and then sat down slowly, feeling scared. The full horror of my situation dawned on me.

'Don't be afraid,' he said gently running his fingers through my hair. 'You saved your life by accepting Islam. It was the right thing to do and I like that. But I will tell you a secret. Not everybody who accepts Islam and saves his life will have the privilege of sleeping on the cushion of the mansabdaar, his body touching yours. If only I had ability of writing poems in Farsi…' he sighed, 'I would've composed love lyrics on your delicate beauty. How pretty you are! And what youth! Like a bud on the verge of blooming! Sixteen? Seventeen? How old are you? Oh! But I am the most blessed, for I have been bestowed with the fortune of enjoying your perfect face! Have you seen how it's adorned with thin wisps of hair?' He pressed his hands in mine and whispered urgently, 'You're mine, you're mine always! I won't forsake you ever. I swear!' And then he put a heavy gold necklace around my neck and whispered again, 'This is yours. Come now. I've waited long enough,' and pressed himself upon me. I couldn't hide the gross disgust and horror that overwhelmed me. He merely smiled. I wrested myself away from his arms. That seemed to greatly amuse him. I yelled and punched and kicked and tried to prevent the inevitable, like a girl fights to protect her chastity, but he seemed to enjoy my violent protestations. He was never angry—a consummate artist who knew that anger diminishes the rhythm of amorous sport. To him, my protests were like those of a ripe young woman who is smitten with desire but hides it under the pretence of denial. My mind went back in time to relive the tender moments I had shared with my sweet Shyamala. She was fourteen when she married me and I was sixteen. Shyamala…both her body and mind were soft, exquisite and so full of

feeling. The full year I spent with her was heaven. How easily she won me over on the very night of our wedding with these words: ‘Please don’t address me as devi when we are alone. Call me Shyamala. I’m yours forever.’ She was very shy and not very skilled in the erotic arts. But she opened herself up completely to me.

But this experience with the mansabdaar was perverse and new. With her…she…she was the woman as nature had made her. But now, how was I supposed to be the mansabdaar’s *woman*? I had for over a year experienced the tender undulations and pleasure peaks that only a woman’s body is capable of giving…isn’t it disgusting for a man to be a woman and participate in this marauding aberration? I felt thoroughly violated.

But since when has a lust-intoxicated man thought about the feelings of others? I felt vomit well up inside me.

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Ijaz Ahmed would leave his camp very early in the morning. He would go to the fort and personally supervise the back-breaking work of taking control of the political and administrative affairs of Devagarh. He estimated that the task would need two more weeks to complete. It was monotonous but very rewarding. He had to confiscate the gold, diamonds and silver that belonged to the erstwhile royal family, prominent courtiers and rich merchants, and inspect the royal seals and documents. Every day he sent his men to raid the homes of wealthy citizens to loot their wealth. Simultaneously, a small army of men was engaged in counting this wealth that poured in by the hour. Another group of men deposited the already accounted-for loot in large wooden trunks. He would return late in the evening. After dinner, he would enter my tent and my ordeal would commence. After he was done, he would lie down and almost immediately start snoring.

The mullah sahib who accompanied him said that two weeks was ample time to finish the pending task—the one ritual which would complete my conversion into Islam. I knew what it was and each time I heard the mullah sahib remind the mansabdaar of the urgency of carrying it out, my terror was renewed. But in retrospect, my fear was unfounded—pain wasn’t new to me, I was battle-trained and I knew how to withstand the most intense pain. This ritual was painless in comparison but fear continued to haunt me.

‘Don’t be afraid. All the Muslim men all over the world have this ritual

done to them. It is very good. And it will be better for you because it is the final, indelible proof that you are one of us! Imagine your torture if you don't pass through this ceremony. You will be inspected at every step. So…be brave,' the mansabdaar coaxed me. And so, that Friday after Zuhr was over, I underwent khatna. The circumcision did leave me in some pain but the mansabdaar gave me opium and asked me to chew it daily for a few days to deaden the pain. I did accordingly. In a few days, I began to feel a strange sense of kinship with other Muslim men. I came to regard them as brothers. We shared the same mark. We were from the same Deen, we followed the same lifestyle to the last letter. We belonged to the strongest race ever on the earth. We partook in the same noble goal of spreading Holy Islam to the corners of the earth. I felt elevated when I realized that every Muslim living in some faraway place shared the same thoughts. He was one with me and I was one with him. The barber who did my khatna had reassured me with these words: 'Don't be afraid. I'll tell you a benefit of circumcision that mansabdaar sahib hasn't probably told you. Your masculinity will increase. You can drive forty women to exhaustion in one go! I'm not lying. Why do you think the Most Holy Ibrahim made this ritual mandatory for all Muslims? Actually, the full name of this sacred ritual is Sunnat-e-Ibrahim, named after the Prophet Ibrahim.'

After his work in Devagarh was complete, the mansabdaar took me to Delhi. In the beginning, that region of my body ached because I was continuously on horseback almost throughout the day and my wound was still healing. It healed completely in a couple of days and the pain was gone. Throughout the journey, the mullah sahib repeatedly told me how delighted he was that I had undergone the Sunnat ritual. He reassured me many times over and over throughout the journey not to grieve over the death of my family because they all belonged to a period of my life, a period I had spent in ignorance. Gradually, the fort, my father and mother and the rest began to fade from my memory. At night I had grand and elaborate dreams of the time when I would exhaust a slew of beautiful women with my newfound power. At other times, this dream was clothed in different attire—once in Delhi, I would ardently appeal to the badshah's kindness and plead with him that I was previously a royal prince. He would then grant me the position of a sardar. I would take at least four women and lead a life of plentiful pleasure. The culture of Delhi was one of unlimited enjoyment of the zenana life—the pleasures of relishing the choicest of beauties in an extensive harem night and

day. Even a lowly courtier in the badshah's service earned handsomely through jagirs—vast swathes of land under his control. Every courtier had built a huge mansion for himself with separate quarters that housed the zenana. The Shariah law allowed a man to take only four wives. But if a man so married desired to marry another beautiful girl of a tender age, he could pronounce talaq to any of his four wives and marry this new girl. It went beyond this. The culture of Delhi also allowed a man to keep as many concubines as his rank, status and wealth permitted him. The zenana of every courtier was filled with tens of women. The majority of these were usually the spoils of war. And then there were other women, belonging to the families of poor peasants who were unable to pay land taxes. The tax collectors took the virgin girls and young wives of these peasants and put them in the zenana. These women became the servants of the wives of the courtier who owned the zenana and he could pull them to his bed anytime he wanted. But any amir or jagirdar or mansabdaar, however powerful and wealthy he was and no matter how large his mansion was, always knew what would happen after his death. His entire property, all his gold and diamonds and his whole zenana became the property of the government, of the badshah. The badshah's men would visit his home the very next moment after his death and seize his jewellery, clothes, elephants, horses and weapons, all the way up to the last utensil. His wives and children got nothing unless the badshah showed some mercy and provided whatever little for them. If he didn't, they were on the streets instantly. The amirs and jagirdars were well aware of this brutal final outcome. It was why they built lavish mansions one after the other and hoarded women and wealth and indulged in every form of sensual pleasure as long as they were alive. The older they grew, the younger were the virgins they sought, so that they could be aroused to the same pitch as before. Doctors who both concocted and distributed aphrodisiacs were in great demand and were compensated generously. Several of these noblemen wanted young girls as well as boys like me, and such noblemen were accorded a special place by their peers—I used to see how in lavish parties, a naughty wink or smile signalled hearty approval for this dual propensity for pleasure. This shocking perversion was met with acclaim, not repulsion.

I had tried very hard to fathom the actual reason behind Ijaz Ahmad's nightly outrage on my body during the stay in his camp outside Devagarh. A battle engagement meant either severe shortage or absolute unavailability of women. Ijaz Ahmad had sated his lust using me as a substitute for a woman.

But nothing prepared me for what I underwent at his enormous mansion in Delhi. There, his dual propensity for pleasure became a confirmed fact. Indeed, Delhi was where I learnt for the first time that there existed men who sought and found pleasure in both men and women. My existence in that mansion suddenly reminded me of the ones who were dearer than life to me and who were now in the Other World, while I, the coward, lived on this earth in despicable slavery. My dream of appealing to the badshah's mercy to grant me an honourable position, even if it was that of a lowly foot soldier, was cruelly shattered. I preferred to die as a warrior bearing arms rather than this fate that was forced on me. It was several days later that I realized that it was unimaginable to even fantasize that a slave like me would have an opportunity to step outside the mansion.

But my real humiliation was just beginning. Another incident occurred that multiplied my disgust a thousandfold. Mansabdaar Ijaz Ahmad used to parade me with great pride before his friends who visited his mansion. I could see unclothed lust in their eyes the moment they saw me. In no time, they began conversing with Ijaz Ahmad in Farsi, Arabic or Turkish. By then I had picked up enough of these languages to understand the conversation. After this, Ijaz Ahmad used to order me to go into a room with his friend. As a slave, I had no freedom to question my master's order. In the room, my duty was to follow my master's friend's instructions and I did so faithfully. He made me do things that drove him to a febrile pitch. I've constantly wondered how, when two people come together to seek pleasure in each other, they are aroused naturally and there is little or no need for forced stimulation but…but…this was profane, against nature. And it was just not him. Every friend of Ijaz Ahmad wanted me to titillate him in his own way—there are as many perverted ways of stimulation as there are perverts. Over time, I got used to this and got over my disgust, performing my duty with the detachment of a doctor who treats even the worst of diseases. There was no alternative. Escape was out of question.

When I was brought into the city, the census officer entered my name as the slave of Mansabdaar Ijaz Ahmad in his register. The rules for getting in and out of the city were very stringent. Everybody had to obtain a permit. In case anybody got out without a permit, word would be sent at lightning speed to every single census office in all cities, towns and villages surrounding Delhi. Horsemen would swiftly hunt down the man and once caught in that manner, there would be no hearing in any court. The man's legs would be

amputated.

I often thought about the real reason Ijaz Ahmad's friends fancied me. Was it my age? I decided to find out. By then, I had gained a valuable insight about people like Ijaz Ahmad and his friends. The long wake after satisfying my host-of-the-moment's desire was the best time to ask questions—questions, which in ordinary times would have infuriated him. That wake was the period when my enjoyer was in a state of extreme benignity. Equally, I had learned the trick of asking a touchy question, which would be interpreted favourably. But there was one question that I knew was pointless to ask: no matter how pleased any friend of Ijaz Ahmad was with me, he would never accede to release me from slavery. And so, on one such occasion, I asked Abdul Khaadar, an amir, in a very soft tone, 'Is your love for me really that intense? Really? I…I…I could feel it today.'

His face instantly showed the ecstasy he must have felt upon hearing my words. He replied, 'Why do you think it isn't? Why do you think I came here three times? For you…only for you! The very vision of your delicate face drives me delirious with love. For you. Today I was engaged in an important matter and you suddenly entered my thoughts and lo! I jumped on my horse at that instant and hurried here. Do you know how tough it is for me to be in your master's obligation when I ask him the favour of being in your pleasurable company? But I don't care.'

'But why? I…I don't understand…I mean, I'm also a boy and I have manliness just like you.'

'Now, you must not remind me of that. Not all boys have your ability to kindle such tender love in me. You are special. Your beauty is one in a thousand…you…you…you're a perfect combination of the delicate beauty of a woman and the rough hardness of a man. You will remain as beautiful even after your sprouting hair becomes a full-grown moustache.'

I stood before a mirror and looked at myself for a long time. It was true, I was handsome. My good looks were the subject of much adoration since childhood. My sweet Shyamala had confided on our wedding night how her friends and even older women had told her how lucky she was to marry a handsome lad like me. But…but they were women and it was natural for them to find me attractive, in the way a woman finds a man desirable. How could *men* find me attractive in the same way? With that, my feeling of disgust towards these people's culture and tastes was now mixed with confusion.

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One day, a powerful sardar named Moinuddin Turani came visiting at Ijaz Ahmad's house. He was aged about forty-five. He had a sharp nose. His white-and-black beard stood pronounced on his milky fair complexion. He spoke with Ijaz Ahmad for some time and then I was sent for. I respectfully did salaam aleikum. He acknowledged it with approval and looked at me. I was dressed in a pyjama, and wore a gold-coloured half coat over an embroidered shirt. A black topi sat on my head. After about two minutes, Ijaz Ahmad ordered, 'Get back to your room.'

After some time, he sent for me again. Looking at Moinuddin Turani's direction, he said, 'He is the most esteemed mansabdaar of ten thousand, Moinuddin Turani. Perform mujra and show that you respect him. I have sold you to him for one thousand rupees. From this instant, you are his slave. Although you don't have the freedom to know the price, I have shown great mercy upon you and told you your price so that you're aware of your standing among slaves. Male slaves of your age are worth between fifteen and twenty rupees in the market. So you see! The mansabdaar is as generous as he is merciful.'

It was his command and that was that. I had no recourse to…forget protesting, I couldn't dare tell Ijaz Ahmad that I liked his house. The past one year had taught me many more things, but this was one fundamental lesson I had imprinted on my soul—I could be bought and sold like cows and goats and horses and I had the same freedom as they did. I had to go with Moinuddin Turani sahib and I had to continue performing the same duty. I would please his friends and my living conditions would be better than the slaves worth fifteen or twenty rupees. Another realization struck me right then—these slaves would do torturous work, slogging in sweltering heat all day till their skins turned permanently black. But I would suffer no such torture. He would keep me indoors. I looked at both men and then went back to my quarters without paying obeisance to my hitherto master, Ijaz Ahmad.

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I was taken to Moinuddin's stable, which housed more than two hundred horses. There I was led to the room of the stable's caretaker and treated to a

sumptuous meal. Many minutes after the meal, I was given a round pellet.

‘Swallow this,’ the two gigantic men barked roughly.

I knew it was opium.

‘But why?’ I asked softly.

‘Do as you’re told! Sardar’s orders!’

I hesitated for a while, thinking. Everything was new to me. I knew nothing about these people. It was unsettling. I decided to obey. I swallowed the pellets and drank the full glass of water they gave me.

‘Follow us.’

I followed them. They took me around the entire stable once and then we returned to the caretaker’s room. Now they asked me to sleep on the place where the caretaker slept. As I lay down, my vision began to grow hazy. The opium was taking effect. Till today, I cannot clearly remember what happened next. Everything had slowed down. One of the men held wooden tongs a cubit long. It appeared like a toy in his hand. Suddenly two burly men appeared from nowhere…now they were pressing me down farther and farther back on the ground with their feet. I was looking up, trying to understand exactly what they intended to do with me. In the next instant, I felt two heavy, powerful feet, one on each shoulder, plastering me to the ground. They were very heavy, like iron, but I felt no pain. And now I sensed somebody removing my pyjamas and then felt a blast of air from the surroundings. I realized, hazily, that I was naked waist down. And then I felt something else. The man with the strong wooden tongs was moving them towards my testicles and before I could apprehend what he was about to do, I felt my testicles grappled in the tight grip of those tongs. Sheer terror shook me out of my haze. I emitted a hysterical shriek, not concealing the pure horror I felt and repeatedly entreated them to stop, now weeping like a child. I tried to writhe in order to loosen the clench of the tongs on my testicles, but it seemed as if my whole body was impaled to the ground. Sweat flowed from my pores in a continuous stream, as if in tandem with the sound of the pitiful moan of my own voice. ‘No, no no no no…please…please…please, no no…please please…please, no!’ The deadly embrace of the tongs was more precise now and it grew tighter with every moan that escaped my now-numb lips. Then it happened in a fraction of a brain-shattering fraction. Phat! Phrrrrratt! was all I heard before the unimaginable explosion of intense agony that erupted in my loins charged forth towards all ends of my being at the speed of a hundred thousand horses. Followed by blackness.

I remember almost nothing of what happened next. I don't recall how many days or weeks of suffering I underwent. Or how long I remained in a state of semi-consciousness. Or how long my testicles were swollen. Or how long it took for the swelling to subside. When I reached the state where I could understand what people spoke, I was with an old man who was wearing very loose white pyjamas and an equally loose white shirt. He sported a very long and very white beard that he repeatedly stroked when he spoke. 'You are now in a state where your pain has reached a tolerable level. I can see that from your face. You're very, very lucky to be alive. I sat by you night and day and treated you and ensured that you did not die. But you must know that three out of four who undergo this treatment die.'

'But for what disease was I treated?' I asked.

'Oh! So, you haven't yet understood what this was about! I have made you a hijra by completely taking out your masculinity. After you've fully healed, you'll be put in the service of a zenana. You can be allowed to freely mingle with the most beautiful woman in the zenana. I will tell you a secret: if you earn the trust and liking of the women in the zenana, you will have no trouble in leading a life as rich as that of those women. You can eat the best food and live in the finest of quarters.'

Then I understood. The wooden tongs that I had seen through my opium-induced haze was incomprehensible back then. In Devagarh, farmers and cowherds used to tie the legs of bulls and use similar wooden tongs to castrate them. I was merely a boy and I had blushed when I heard that castrated bulls were bereft of any desire to jump on cows, or if they were forcibly made to climb on a cow, they wouldn't accomplish anything.

Then I recalled another piece of information I had heard in Ijaz Ahmad's mansion. These people hunted down and castrated mostly healthy and virile young men for the sole purpose of serving in the zenana, because natural-born eunuchs were very rare to find. I had no idea how they would actually carry out the castration. Moreover, I had not the faintest inkling that it would happen to me. After becoming Ijaz Ahmad's slave, there were occasions when I used to want a woman but I could count on my fingers the number of times the desire arose—Ijaz Ahmad, and later his friends, had killed it almost completely with their perverse, beastly enjoyment of my body. Now that I no longer had my manhood, I realized the possibility existed that they might still enjoy me.

The old man—he was a doctor—said, 'Mansabdaar Turani Sahib has

been most merciful in your case. He paid a thousand rupees before you were made a hijra.'

'What's the difference?'

'I told you earlier that three out of four men who undergo this treatment die. If you had died, his money would have gone waste. But the loss is still fine because the mansabdaar had decided that you were the fittest to serve in his zenana. That in itself is a rare honour, and it shows his special affection towards you. Does it or doesn't it?'

I vaguely nodded my head. I was half dozing by then and fell into a deep sleep, not understanding what exactly he meant. Gradually they reduced the quantity of opium they used to give me. I still spent my days in stupor but in moments of complete comprehension, I contemplated on whether it was just for one man to enslave another. Which god would be pleased by such an act? At other times, I thought about whether there were any limits to slavery. What kind of god permitted a victor to destroy a man's manhood and if it was a woman, to ravish her body at will and enjoy any number of women?

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A few more days later, the doctor minutely examined my privates to see if they were completely healed and confirmed that I was indeed a hijra. I was appointed as a slave in Moinuddin's zenana. Moinuddin's mansion was almost eight times bigger than Ijaz's. Why, it even dwarfed the palace at Devagarh!

I realized how we used to follow a different notion of kingship at Devagarh. Everything in the kingdom was not subservient to the pleasures of the king, as it was here. This was strictly in order with the Sanatana or the eternal principles of kingship. A king was bound by the decision of his council of ministers and noble and distinguished citizens of his kingdom. Every decision—even the most basic matters of revenue and expenditure and taxes—had to compulsorily have the approval of these people. Irrespective of whether it was a man, woman, child, girl, boy, cripple or blind, a king had to tend to them as if he was their father. This meant that there was a limit and a check on the luxury permitted to the palace.

But this Moinuddin was a ten-thousand mansabdaar. I learnt that this didn't mean that he always had a contingent of ten thousand war-trained soldiers at his disposal. It simply meant that it was his responsibility to

marshal this number of men whenever the badshah ordered for such a contingent. The mansabdaar had to maintain these many people from the revenue he earned from the land grant, the jagir, which the badshah had allotted him. Equally, he had to maintain a lifestyle that suited his rank. And so when the mansabdaar urgently needed money, he would increase taxes and sometimes together with it he would introduce newer and hitherto-unheard of taxes. Farmers who were unable to pay these new taxes were rounded up and auctioned in the slave market. In this way, a mansabdaar was a feudal chieftain. He had direct access to the court, and a mansabdaar's rank was determined by the number prefixed to his title.

Moinuddin's mansion had an expansive garden in the front. It had two tall storeys built in accordance with the Farsi style of architecture that was the fashion in Delhi. The zenana was located in the centre after one got past the main door and crossed two massive verandas. Until then, I had never seen a zenana—not even in Ijaz Ahmad's mansion, where I was used like a woman.

From the time I was caught and made prisoner, I had only seen a particular class of women—wives of the poor farmers or women who worked on the streets or in fields as labourers. They were dressed in tatters and wore no jewellery. They had no flowers on their coarse, unoiled and uncombed hair. They sported nothing to protect their feet from the blistering Delhi sun, and the same sun had charred their skin. They were slaves and they all looked like slaves—it was difficult to tell whether they were male or female. My heart broke whenever I saw these joyless people. There was no way I could look at them as women and feel any desire.

But the women in Moinuddin's zenana! They were beautiful, each in a different way. They were always bedecked, wearing the softest silks and a dazzling array of finely-crafted jewellery made of sparkling gold, diamond, pearls and rubies. The harsh rays of the Delhi sun didn't touch their impeccable skin and thick tresses, meticulously cared for by an army of servants.

Moinuddin had four wives, whom he had wedded in the traditional way. Each wife had about eight to twelve female servants. These female servants too, were young, pretty and adorned to the extent that their status afforded them. Their duties followed a fixed routine. They had to arrange for the mistress's lavish meal, decorate her luxurious bed and massage her body with special oils to make her skin smooth and her muscles supple. While the mistress basked in the oil, they prepared her bath by heating the water to an

optimum temperature. Once the water was ready, they gave her a leisurely bath, slowly rubbing the oil away, and then applied perfume all over, then again applied scented vapour to her wet hair before finally decorating her with clothes and jewellery that exuded her youth in the most seductive manner possible. If she was bored, they had to entertain her by singing her favourite songs or dancing for her. But then she was always bored, given that her husband was almost never with her. Mostly, it was because she was angry that her husband was spending more time with some other woman. And it was to these maidservants that she turned to confide her angst. The servant would listen sympathetically and offer a few words of comfort.

One day, Moinuddin visited Begum Jamila Banu. The begum was thirty years old, I think. She was ecstatic. This visit proved to her that Allah's grace was upon her. She seated him on the large swing, sat beside him and began to press his hands, feet and legs in soft, soothing strokes. She ordered her servants to entertain him. A troop of four of her servants applied perfume while another troop began to fan him from behind. After he showed signs that he was pleasantly relaxed, the first troop began to sing, while yet another troop of four began to dance to the music. The master was clearly savouring this performance. After a very long time, his eyes reflected the cloudy expression of desire. The begum knew when she saw this that her moment of salvation had arrived. She moved her fingers on the top of his palms in slow, deliberate motions. He did not seem to notice it. His vision was fixed on Keshara Bai, one of the most arresting dancers in the zenana, an honour Jamila Begum had herself bestowed upon her. After a long time, he rose. It was time to go to the sleeping quarters. The begum also stood up immediately, taking this as an unspoken hint. He took two giant strides, took hold of Keshara Bai's hand and then pulled her into the sleeping room.

The begum's eyes now turned into a hundred knives. But she knew that to even mildly question the mansabdaar's behaviour would be fatal. If he learnt it from other sources, he'd order her to be lashed or worse, pronounce talaq. With some effort, she regained her composure and commanded the troop to continue the music and dance. It was both impossible and unnatural for her to ever forgive Keshara Bai. But she had to be careful with the dancer who had suddenly risen in the mansabdaar's favour. If she complained, he'd surely pronounce talaq and marry her. Or pull the slave girl into the bedroom in her presence just to spite her. Three days after the incident, she confided in Naheed Kanchini, one of her trusted servants, over several tearful hours.

Naheed herself told me this after we became good friends and she knew she could trust me. Besides, Naheed hated Keshara Bai…no she was actually jealous of Keshara Bai who, according to Naheed, had deprived her of the pleasure of serving the mansabdaar. She was also glad that the begum was upset. The begum deserved it, she said, it was a fitting punishment for hectoring the servants throughout her life. ‘She has to have the best, the richest food every single day. Two, three, four varieties of meat, vegetable, curries and sweets and we keep her skin glowing and her muscles supple. There’s no way she won’t become fat. But look at us. We work the whole day. We run around. We dance. We eat in moderation. Our bodies are always youthful and flexible like a bow. Isn’t it natural that the master will desire us? Which is why she guards us like a snake guards a treasure. And she also vomits poison like a snake. Jealousy. But she knows that there is no zenana without us.’

I thought about this and did a quick calculation. Four begums and fifty-two servants in all. Apart from them, sixteen kanchinis. They were also called prisoners. The scriptures prohibited a man from marrying more than four women, but he could take any number of prisoners. These were typically the women taken as prisoners in a victorious campaign. Or they were bought in slave auctions. Or gifted by a friend. While they weren’t legally wedded wives, their status was slightly better than the servants. And they didn’t have servants like the begums had. At best, they had a couple of assistants. They spent their days practising music and honing their dancing skills and when the master desired them, they had to consider it their great fortune. Food was cooked in a common kitchen but dishes were carefully segregated in containers of various sizes and the appropriate dish sent to the begum who ordered it made. Expert chefs used the best ingredients from a vast array of spices to prepare heavenly curries, among other things. The aroma of cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, almond, anise, coriander, chilli, cumin, cashew, fenugreek, copra and mustard was enough to make even an overfull man hungry again. Chefs commanded enormous salaries. There were gradations even there—cooks who were experts at making all kinds of sweetmeats earned better. The mansabdaar always had his meals inside the zenana, taking turns to eat with one begum today and the other the next day. The kanchinis ate after the begum’s meals were over and after the kanchinis, it was the turn of the servants and eunuchs like me. Our spread was nowhere close to theirs, but it was still really good and definitely, infinitely better than

what the horsemen, mahouts and foot soldiers ate. These men cooked their own food with whatever they could afford. We mostly used to be given the extra food the master and the begums had left over. Once the palate was accustomed to this taste, the greatest dread of the lowliest servant in the zenana was the termination of services.

The zenana had fourteen eunuchs, including me. One of them was from a country called Abyssinia. He was charcoal black, very tall and had an imposing build. He had curly hair and was about fifty years old. He told me he was a born eunuch. He was called a nazar, which meant he was the chief eunuch. He allotted work to the rest of us, supervised our tasks and kept a strict watch on our movements. He had the authority to directly report to the mansabdaar if any of us made a mistake. He could report on even the female servants in the zenana and his word was final. The mansabdaar blindly believed him and a bad report meant severe punishment. The entire zenana, including the begums, dreaded him.

Five years ago, a female servant and a eunuch were caught making love in the bathroom. Both of them knew that the eunuch could do nothing but the urge was overwhelming. The nazar had long suspected them of having an arrangement of this sort. And so he waited and caught them in the act. It seems they fainted on the spot when they saw this fearsome nazar. The punishment for adultery was death. But the mansabdaar was out of Delhi on a campaign in the Deccan. The case was taken to Begum Sultana Banu, the first wife of the mansabdaar. She was a very pious woman who did her namaz five times daily as prescribed. She was always on a roza and chanted the holy verses from the Koran. In many ways, she had the main control over the supervision of the zenana, followed by the mansabdaar himself. She was flabby and fat stubbornly sat on her body. Age showed on her. However, the fact that the mansabdaar still retained her as his wife without giving her talaq showed how much he loved and respected her. She had made a name for herself as a pious and compassionate woman. When the accused stood before her, she patiently heard the case and pronounced her verdict. Both of them had to surrender their life savings. The eunuch was transferred to the stable. The servant was sent to the slave market where she was bought for twenty rupees. In the end, they were simply thankful that their lives had been spared.

The remaining twelve eunuchs were like me—prisoners of war whose testicles had been subsequently broken and then assigned to serve in the zenana. Two were from Malwa. Four were from Bundelkhand. The six of

them were caught when they were very young. They had no memory of the pain of the treatment and showed no bitterness. They were loyal to the mansabdaar and accepted the authority of the mansion without opposition. They were about thirty to forty years old. The other six were from the Gouda country. They told me that parents in that country break the testicles of their own male children when they are four years old and then sell them in the slave market because they can't pay taxes. After being repeatedly sold and after changing hands of many middlemen, they ended up here. They had no loyalty other than to the master who gave them food and shelter. Their minds did not admit even the notion of questioning the justness of the way they were treated in the zenana. The natural condition of their existence comprised food, work and sleep.

Father's research on eunuchs ran into thirty-two handwritten pages. It covered travelogues by prominent European travellers such as Manuki and Bernier who toured India during the Mughal period—books long out of print, long unavailable. Which means he had to sit in the library for several days and make notes. Which means he was in Bangalore. And he knew that I lived in Bangalore. And yet, he didn't visit me even once…did he even think of me? Nothing in these thirty-two pages contains even a word of anything related to me.

Father's note read:

> In their boyhood, Mughal princes were trained in zenanas under the tutelage of women and Hijras brought in via the slave trade market from such countries as Russia, Ethiopia, Caucasia, and Gurjustan (Georgia today). Most of these Hijras were corrupt in proportion to their age, background, and the culture they came from. They coached the princes in the art of licking the superior's shoes and kicking those below them. (Bernier. *Travels in the Mughal Empire* 1656–1668. *Revised by A.V. Smith, Oxford, 1934, pp. 144–45.)*

Father's note again:

> The main duties of eunuchs included serving the women, keeping an eye on their movements and reporting suspicious behaviour to the

Nazar. This system meant that the women were compelled to treat the eunuchs nicely if they had to carry out their clandestine affairs. These affairs included obtaining liquor and opium and at the riskiest extreme, it included smuggling their lovers into the zenana. However, in some cases, these eunuchs were themselves called into satisfying the amorous needs of these women to the best of their ability. Such eunuchs had a special power over these women. (Pelsaert, Francisco. *Jahangir's India*, translated by W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl, Cambridge 1925, p. 99.)

Eunuchs also supplied women to princes who had just entered manhood.—Another note (K.S. Lal: *Mughal Harem*, pp. 158–59, 184–85, 187–88.)

Aurangzeb had appointed a hijra as the chief jailor to guard the Agra prison where he had imprisoned his father. In his *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* or *Jahangir's Memoirs*, Akbar's son Jahangir writes: 'In Hindustan, especially in the province of Sylhet, which is a dependency of Bengal, it was the custom for the people of those parts to make eunuchs of some of their sons and give them to the governor in place of revenue (mal-wajibi). This custom has been adopted in varying degrees in other provinces, and every year some children are thus ruined and cut off from procreation.' The Bengal of those times spanned a very vast area, including the hilly ranges of the north, the Sarkar region of Orissa and parts of Bihar. This custom quickly spread throughout the Mughal Empire. Jahangir issued an order prohibiting this custom as well as indulging in the trafficking of eunuchs. However, this order didn't meet with the expected success, as the governors made use of the existing legal provision that allowed them to take eunuchs in lieu of money. Jahangir further says that Syed Khan Chugtai had twelve hundred eunuchs in his service. Besides, eunuch-trafficking was very profitable because eunuchs fetched three times the price of an ordinary slave. Indian hijras were in great demand in not just Delhi but Isfahan and Samarkhand. Although Aurangzeb banned the practice of castrating boys owing to religious reasons, he didn't prohibit the practice of castrating grown men. During his reign, Golconda city (today's Hyderabad) in the year 1659 witnessed some 22,000 castrations. However, Jahangir exhibited better wisdom in comparison: he wanted non-castrated boys in lieu of

tax. He would first convert them, thereby ensuring that the future generations that emerged from these boys would be Muslim.

I want to incorporate all of these thirty-two pages of research into my novel but it'll ruin the novel's tempo. Father's research and pointers to further reading ensured that material was available in abundance. However, abundant availability of material doesn't automatically translate into a quality work of historical fiction. The work must exhibit the essence of all that research. I wasn't writing an academic work on history. Father had planned to do that.

I continued reading his notes, fascinated:

Several hijras went on to become mighty generals. Sultan Balban's Vazir, the minister Imaruddin Rehan; Allah-ud-din Khalji's general, Kuffr Hajjar Dinari; and Kutub-ud-din Mubarak Khalji's confidant, Khadausha, were notable hijras who rose to positions of power. In 1394, Sultan Mahmud honoured his minister, a black eunuch named Khwaja Jahan Malik Sarvar, by bestowing the Malik-us-Shirk title upon him and made him the subedaar of Jaunpur. A few days after he assumed control of Jaunpur, Malik Sarvar launched a blistering campaign that led him to capture the entire region encompassing Kol (today's Aligarh) in the west to Tirhat in Bihar in the east. This campaign earned him the title of Sultan-us-Shirk. During the Mughal rule, eunuchs belonging to the lower ranks of naazir and khwaja saras eventually rose to the ranks of mansabdaar and subedaar. However, these lower ranks were not wholly derogatory. They were regarded as Aitmad Khan or Aitbar Khan (trusted courtiers). One of the Aitbar Khans, who served both Babar and Humayun, was made the subedaar of Delhi by Akbar in recognition of his loyalty. Akbar also made another Aitbar Khan a thousand mansabdaar and entrusted him with strengthening the economy, and yet another was appointed as a four thousand mansabdaar and sent to Gujarat. Aurangzeb promoted Bakhtawar Khan, the chief supervisor of eunuchs, to the rank of a thousand mansabdaar. Manuki has provided a list of forty naazirs along with the titles and ranks of each naazir in the service of Aurangzeb. These eunuchs might have risen up the ranks by displaying fierce valour as a means of compensating their lost

masculinity. However, these were stray exceptions. Not every hijra could dream of catching the emperor's attention.

I contemplated turning the destiny of my novel's protagonist in such a way that he would attract the badshah's attention but immediately abandoned the idea because if I did that, it would not only be contrary to the insights Father had gained from his back-breaking research but it would be twisting history itself: it would mean justifying the testicle-smashing culture.

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About two months after I was put in the zenana, Sultana Banu Begum sent for me. No servant had the freedom to initiate talk with any begum. It was considered disobedience and bad manners. Begum Sultana kept track of every new slave who joined or others who left the zenana. Nazar had told me very early that she was akin to an administrative head, when he coached me on every nuance of my behaviour and conduct inside the zenana. In fact, I was formally inducted into the zenana only after he was satisfied that I was fit to move in. When I arrived, the begum sahiba was reclining against a soft pillow on her swing, which swayed back and forward very slowly. A maidservant standing at a short distance was fanning rhythmically by pulling the jute wires attached to the khuskhus grass fan—which measured three yards long and a yard wide—hanging down from the ceiling. She was holding an incense stick in her hand and when she saw me, she motioned with a finger. I moved closer but stopped at a respectful distance, then said salaam aleikum, then bowed and did the mujra.

'Are you a eunuch by birth or did you undergo the treatment?' the begum questioned in a firm but dignified tone.

'I underwent treatment. Mansabdaar sahib bought me, and then made me undergo the treatment before putting me in the service of the merciful sahiba,' I submitted with utmost humility.

'Weren't you captured in battle?'

'Yes.'

'If you hadn't forsaken the false faith and accepted the Only True Faith before the battle, you wouldn't have had to suffer this fate even if you were defeated in battle. Why did you delay?'

I didn’t reply…I had no reply. I have asked myself this question a hundred times. Why? Father didn’t abandon his faith when he had a chance. Why? The badshah, the alamgir, ruler of the world wouldn’t have attacked us if we had converted to Islam. We would still be the rulers of our kingdom. At the worst, we’d be a feudatory of the badshah. Or I could have led the life of a mansabdaar or subedaar of a trusted principality of the badshah. We were completely ruined by our faith in a powerless god made of stone. I could have had a mansion similar to this and I could have owned a zenana like this. Now I was just a hijra and a slave. Why? These thoughts would always end in violent but helpless fury against my previous faith of ignorance. The begum’s question lit this fuse and I exploded again inwardly, but showed nothing on my face.

Sensing that I wouldn’t reply, she continued, ‘Do you do your namaz five times daily?’

‘I do, but not regularly.’

‘Do it. It will do you good. I have heard that many hijras have become mansabdaars and subedaars. You were once a prince. Your conduct is cultured and your speech is refined. Which is why I gave this advice.’

I thought her advice was sensible and from that day, I began to perform namaz regularly.

After four years, life in Moinuddin Sahib’s zenana had become a benumbing activity of watching the lives of others. I had no private life. It was the same—new kanchinis and prisoners were admitted at unpredictable intervals and existing ones whose youth and beauty and charm had begun to fade were sold away to lower-ranking mansabdaars or other courtiers. Some older women were retained but such women had won the hearts of the mansabdaar and his begums by the sheer force of their faultless conduct and stainless obedience. They were provided with food and clothes and somehow continued their lives. However, not all women could force themselves to show this kind of faultless conduct, knowing every minute that their fate would turn for the worse once their youth faded. They obeyed the rules of the zenana because they had no other choice, but they used to seethe with the hopeless rage that boiled inside them. The women that were sent out of here usually found a home in Shaitanpura, notorious for prostitution. It was said that Shaitanpura was under the direct watch of the throne from the time of Akbar Badshah, who had appointed a special record keeper who made note of the men that visited the place. However, the amirs, subedaars, mansabdaars

and other noblemen took their friends there to entertain them and bribed the record keeper not to enter their names in his register.

Begum Sultana Banu used to visit the badshah's zenana once every four months or so. Every single visit was strictly by invitation from that zenana, a matter of immense pride as well as a powerful symbol of status. The begum's palanquin was completely covered with a silk cloth with small windows on either side. Each window was covered with flaps, which she could lift and peek outside but the outside world couldn't see what was inside. Eight well-built eunuchs, four on the front and four at the rear, carried the palanquin on their shoulders. An additional rear guard comprising soldiers holding swords and bows and arrows followed the palanquin. A troop of about ten female servants, covered from head to toe in black, shapeless garments followed the guard.

One day, the begum sahiba ordered me to come along with her to visit the badshah's zenana. Upon reaching the main entrance of the fort, our entourage was thoroughly inspected by the guards there. They confirmed for themselves, beyond doubt, that I was actually a eunuch. Female guards inspected the female servants. The palanquin-bearing eunuchs and the rear guard were not permitted to enter the fort. After passing this scrutiny, we entered the fort and some distance later, we turned left and stood outside the main entrance of the zenana. Now the begum sahiba herself was first examined by female guards and allowed to pass. Her servants went next while a well-muscled eunuch examined me and declared that I was fit to enter the zenana. Moinuddin's zenana was a tiny hut compared to this sprawling world. Uncountable mansions built completely of marble, each a palace in its own right, and each mansion belonging to a begum. Every mansion had gardens of various sizes and small canals around the periphery. You could count the number of Moinuddin's begum's servants on the fingers of your hand but here, every begum had an entire army of servants who wore shiny dresses made of red and green and orange. Their golden necklaces and bangles shone in the sun and created the illusion that they were princesses. But my zenana-trained eyes instantly detected their true rank and status—actually, it was not difficult. Spending four years in the zenana had taught me to recognize the rank of a person by just looking at the face.

Sultana Begum was a personal friend of Aurangzeb Badshah's third begum, Rani Udaipuri Mahal. The friendship though was on the rani sahiba's terms. I learned much later that Rani Udaipuri Mahal was a slave who

originally hailed from Gurjistan. Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb Badshah's eldest brother, had brought, her into his zenana. Subsequently, a fierce power struggle for the Mughal throne ensued between the brothers. It ended in the defeat and death of the eldest brother at the hands of Aurangzeb Badshah. Rani Udaipuri Mahal's matchless beauty won Aurangzeb Badshah's heart. She shrewdly sensed the change in fortunes and switched her affections to the new Badshah. She commanded a special place in his life and it was said that the badshah indulged her like he indulged no other begum. Rani Udaipuri Mahal was prone to excessive drinking and her drunken behaviour, obnoxious to the extreme, caused major embarrassment to the badshah and everybody present. I have seen with my own eyes how the badshah, himself a thorough teetotaller, overlooked her inebriated excesses. I could only imagine the plight of anybody else in her place.

It was normally the custom for lower-ranking people, when they visited a superior-ranking person, to get gifts befitting the status of the superior, a very old custom that the Mughals kept alive. In turn, the higher-ranking person would bestow a similar baksheesh, a tip, to the visitor. Sultana Begum usually gave an expensive necklace or bangle or rubies and pearls to Rani Udaipuri Mahal. Even then, this was not enough of a gift for Aurangzeb Badshah's favourite queen. Actually, she was not his legal wife but she commanded a higher place than his legally-wedded wives. And now, standing in one of the inner quarters of the badshah's zenana, I heard Sultana Begum's voice summon me. I felt the mahal sahiba's eyes all over my body as she examined me. Sultana Begum turned to me and said, 'I have told the Most Esteemed mahal sahiba many good things about you. She is very pleased with you. Your life is truly blessed now! I have gifted you to her. Show her the same loyalty, obedience, dedication and good behaviour that you showed me all these years. Drink poison from her hands, thinking it to be elixir.'

Rani Udaipuri Mahal was pleased. She nodded lightly, signalling her acceptance. I briefly looked at her. Her body was almost buried in dazzling jewellery.

I felt special…I mean, I *was* special to serve in the badshah's zenana! I basked in this newfound exhilaration for two full days. This was an alleviating escape from the murderous monotony of Moinuddin Sahib's zenana. On the other hand, I knew everybody back there and I had made many good friends. I was the confidant of many kanchinis and servants and

other eunuchs. I felt good that they trusted me with their intimate problems and they trusted me because I listened with infinite patience and I kept secrets. But in the end, their problems were the same. Pettiness. Jealousy. Backbiting. Anxiety.

But this zenana was different. It was a whole world, which you could never fully discover, where it was easy to get lost in a directionless maze. But it was an exciting…a special world. This world decided the fate of the entire Hindustan. It was the sea into which the numerous rivers of political gossip merged. Political and military decisions were always made in highest secrecy in the Diwan-e-Aam or the Diwan-e-Khaas—the forbidden secret chambers of the badshah. However, news invariably leaked into the zenana. Select groups whispered political tides into each other's ears, despite severe strictures to the contrary. It was common for the same eunuch to be part of the whispering sessions of multiple groups. This way, everybody knew everything.

7

I suppose it's my fault. An ideal wife should wash her husband's clothes, press them, cook the food he loves and give him pleasure in bed. Either she should do all this or get them done by a maid…well, all except the pleasure-giving bit. But why does a wife need to be an ideal wife in an age when she works out of home like men do—in offices, construction sites, buses and hospitals? I know women who demand that their husband share the workload at home: cook, wash, clean and the rest. I've never been the demanding sort but just as he expects me to go there and satisfy his needs, why hasn't it ever occurred to Amir that he could come to Narasapura just once and satisfy mine? Barely two hours of driving. His excuse that he is a Muslim and that the villagers here won't take kindly to him is not credible. There's a more fundamental reason for Amir's obstinacy but… The very notion of going to Bangalore just to satisfy his need, because it's supposed to be my duty, disgusts me. What happened the last time I went there has sucked out any desire for making love to him.

I guess the real reason he refuses to come here is because I didn't write the script for the Hampi documentary. And I suppose I rubbed salt on his already-wounded pride when he asked my feedback on the script, which Ramamurthy, his assistant, wrote.

> Your documentary is no different from what other self-proclaimed intellectuals produce. It follows the same disgusting tactic—suppressio veri suggestio falsi—and reeks of the same deceit. Frankly, it's a wretched piece of work. The forces that destroyed the temples and idols at Hampi have a long history of wreaking the same devastation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. They merely continued this tradition, a fact which you've shamelessly glossed over to please your political patrons. And I was right in refusing to write the script according to your directions: I cannot

prostitute the truth. I don't grudge the fact that you got it done by Ramamurthy. I hope your patrons are happy, and they've given you more assignments and lots of money.

Was my letter more acidic in tone than usual? When you've decided to tell the truth as it is, considerations of tone and niceties have no place.

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I stopped reading newspapers since I made Narasapura my home over the past year. The reason was more practical—there was no newspaper agent here. I'd forgotten about newspapers but when I casually read some old issues on a recent trip to Bangalore, I realized that I was solely immersed in the history of the past and blind to what was happening in the present. On my way back, I stopped at Kunigal, went to the newsstand at the bus stop and spoke to the agent there. He agreed to send me three Kannada and one English newspaper through the Brahmarambha Bus Service. I had to pick up the newspaper from Rajanna's hotel. I paid the newsagent some advance and sealed the arrangement.

I began to read newspapers cover to cover like before. It didn't take me long to make an assessment of what was happening in the country: three years after the mosque standing on the Ramajanmabhoomi—the place of Rama's birth—was demolished, political parties, more than Muslims themselves, continued to compete with each other to keep the incident alive. Oh well…not just political parties but intellectuals, writers, litterateurs and artists. I could almost hear their refrain: now is the precise time in history, now is the time, which calls upon every Indian to prove whether he is Progressive or not! Most newspapers were filled with long articles and opinion pieces and editorials that relentlessly chanted this refrain. The test of Progressiveness was rather predictable: whether or not you supported the effort to rebuild the mosque on the same site. In parallel, they wrote fiery pieces that sarcastically labelled those that supported the effort to rebuild the temple as 'Rama devotees'.

The Karnataka Litterateurs and Performing Artistes' Association published an advertisement in all major Kannada newspapers. It must have certainly cost a lot because it took up half of the front page and continued on

to the middle sheet. The Artistes' Association thundered against the shocking lack of progress in apprehending the perpetrators of the mosque demolition even three long years post the incident. The culprits were still roaming around untouched because they had successfully exploited the loopholes in the investigative and judicial processes of the country. It was therefore the moral duty of the Artistes' Association to publicly protest this state of affairs by staging a play entitled Brick *in the open-air theatre in Bangalore on 6 December. I read the credits. Concept and script was by the 'renowned Progressive intellectual and academic' Professor Ramamurthy, direction by the 'equally renowned' Kantaraj Hemmaadi, lighting by the 'well-known' stage artist Tejanath, and the star cast was an impressive line-up of 'popular and socially-conscious actors'—Anuradha, Meena, Venkat and others. This was followed by an elaborate paragraph that liberally quoted from Professor Sastri's recently-concluded press conference on the nature and relationship of and the social, moral and political responsibility of artistes.*

I decided to watch it. I was once part of the same crowd that 'Progressive' Professor Ramamurthy, Kantaraj Hemmaadi and the rest belonged to. No, that's not entirely correct, they used to be my followers. And I knew precisely why they were staging this play. Far from any noble intent, they wanted to perpetuate—well, Hindus called it the Ramajanmabhoomi, the birthplace of Rama while Muslims and the entire band of intellectuals called it the Babri Masjid—the memory of the destruction, to keep the controversy kicking. I knew the exact situations the play would create and the techniques they would use to hammer home the conclusion they had sewn beforehand…I had written several such plays in the past. But now, as I think about it, watching the play will serve another important purpose. I can find out first-hand the exact nature of the charade they're sure to enact on stage and compare and review my own thoughts on the relationship between literature and activism, between art and commitment and see how my novel (as it stands, it'll probably end up being at best a long short story) measures on similar parameters. It was an opportunity of sorts for introspection—was my work faithful to historical truths? I was confident the play would help me find out. Besides, it was more than three months since I had seen Amir. I felt guilty. It wasn't right to completely neglect him.

Upon reaching Bangalore, I went home directly. Amina Banu told me that sahib had gone to watch a play. I quickly finished the toast she had made, had tea and before leaving, told her to cook for me tonight. I took an auto

rickshaw and reached the open-air theatre. It was half full. Most in the audience were familiar faces. I sat alone on one of the steps and slowly glanced around the theatre. I suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up behind me but before I could speak:

'Razia? Ah! I suspected as much! Look at you! What happened to you?'

Ratnamala. About my age. Lecturer of English in BES College. Academician. Regular in the stage circuit.

'What happened to me?'

'I…heard…news about you. You've permanently shifted to some village. Reminds me of my grandfather's village. I'd been there long ago. They're so…backward. Filthy, swampy and the damn toilets! Yuck! You know, I had to stay there for two miserable days and I decided to hold my shit in my tummy rather than…you know how it is, right? I mean, how do you stay there?'

'Just like the rest who stay there.'

'Okay, I mean, this is not just about hygiene, okay? Look at your hair. You haven't trimmed it or dyed it. And your face shows wrinkles. Why did you go there?'

She rattled on without waiting for my response. I let her and when it began to annoy me slightly, I stopped her mid-sentence and asked, 'But why don't you have a part in the play?'

'Oh! You don't know Ramamurthy's clique? Bloody dictator sacks anybody who doesn't lick…I mean, he can bully the kids. I walked out. And this when he's not even…oh! And I'm sure you must know this. Your husband is the actual director but you know how it is. If "they" find out that a Muslim has directed it, they'll start the anti-propaganda. Kantaraj Hemmaadi is the director only on paper.'

'Who funded this?' I whispered, leaning close to her.

'Asks she who belongs to the inner circle!'

'Well, you told me yourself that I'm marooned in a remote village,' I said in mock jest.

'Does this mean you've separated from Amir?'

'No! It simply means I'm no longer in the inner circle. Okay, just tell me what you know.' I put my palm in hers and warmly squeezed it, as if the gesture was an oath of secrecy.

'Honestly, only Professor Sastri knows about the funding. He simply thinks of a programme, and money flows in on its own.'

And then we heard the drumroll indicating that the play was about to begin. Simultaneously, the lights began to dim where the audience sat while the stage lit up brightly.

A couple of minutes down, I quickly realized the technique they had chosen—a courtroom-style cross-examination. This technique was still new, almost in the experimental stage. Ramamurthy was not a playwright. He was not even a creative person. He could at best stitch: give him a ready-made script and tell him the technique, he'd neatly stitch the two together. It wasn't a difficult task when the subject is already written and the technique of the play is predetermined; it doesn't take a genius to join them together.

The play opened with five characters slowly making their entrance on stage in order: a historian, Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu pontiff, a middle-aged woman and a Dalit. These five prosecutors came to a stop and stood at one end. And then, just like in a court, the court announcer loudly proclaimed the arrival of the judge. Presently, the judge arrived, sat on his seat, and then said,

'May the accused be presented before this court!'

More characters from a right-wing political party and right-wing organizations made their entrance on stage escorted by policemen, who presented them directly in front of the judge. The judge read out the first accusation from a pad he had in front of him.

'The chief accused has been charged with having disturbed the communal harmony of the nation by taking out a procession, and inciting people to carry bricks so that he could achieve political popularity. Subsequently, he inflamed the passions of ordinary citizens, which resulted in the destruction of the mosque that the Mughal Emperor Babar built. Can you explain to this court whether it's possible to create new history by destroying the foundation stones of history?'

As the judge's speech ended, about fifteen to twenty people silently assembled on the stage and stood behind the judge's seat. Ordinary citizens. Simultaneously, eight actors fully dressed in monkey costumes stood behind the accused. Their tails were stiff and upturned and resembled Hanuman (Rama's trusted aide and friend in the holy Hindu epic Ramayana) in the play Lankadahana.

Now it was the turn of the prosecutor—the Hindu pontiff—to speak.

'The essence of Hinduism is tolerance. But you,' he pointed to the accused in turn before continuing, 'have tarnished this noble religion by

sowing seeds of animosity in the name of Lord Rama. You are not true Hindus. Not just that: you have committed an irreligious act in reducing Lord Rama, the Divine Spirit that resides in all of us, to a mere brick!'

And then the prosecutor donning the part of Mahatma Gandhi spoke, 'The Lord Rama whose name I took on my lips when Nathuram Godse shot me was the lord who resided in the recesses of my heart. And you, my brothers, want to imprison that lord by building a temple for him? I bore no ill-will towards Nathuram and I bear none for you, my brothers, but I will fight and remove the force of evil that lurks in your heart. The same evil force that motivated Nathuram is now clothed in your form. It has motivated you to demolish the house of worship of your brother-religionists. Introspect, my children. Root this evil out of your hearts. Forgiveness is the only punishment you deserve. If the Honourable Judge pronounces a harsh sentence, I shall appeal to him and force him, if necessary, to seek your forgiveness.'

And then the female prosecutor, 'We, as the educated, enlightened and Progressive women, know the evil intent behind your agenda of using Rama as a means of rejuvenating Hinduism! You could have used any other god but no! The injustice committed by Rama against Sita is glorified in the garb of chastity and it'll continue in this culture as long as the Ramayana exists! You plan to rejuvenate the same culture in the name of history while half the population of the country has already awakened to the truth that until the culture of Rama is destroyed, a woman will never be free! I proclaim here that no other religion treats women as horribly as Hinduism does! Answer this court!'

The group of ordinary citizens behind the judge's seat now exclaimed, 'Hear! Hear!'

The judge, pounding the desk, yelled, 'Silence! This is a court!'

The Dalit—the most oppressed class in Hindu society—now spoke. 'What does Rama symbolize? He killed a lower-caste man for the "sin" of performing…penance! Why? So that Rama could maintain the grip that the upper castes had over society. And you want to build a temple for such a retrograde character whom you worship as God. This shows beyond doubt that you want to rekindle the same, millennia-old conspiracy against us, the original inhabitants of India—we who were treated like slaves by the Aryans who invaded us from the outside! Prove to this court that this is not so.'

The script was woven to make the defence of the accused appear pathetically weak. At every turn, the accused stuttered and their expressions

showed helplessness. The prosecutors were set up to interrupt the defence at regular intervals, mock their weak testimony and the fifteen-odd actors who played ordinary citizens barged in with derisive laughter. The actor playing Uma Bharti had relatively spirited lines. Her angry defence was strategically interrupted by the female prosecutor with a self-righteous, 'Oh? We wonder how you, a woman, defend Rama considering what he did to Sita…' This evoked another round of taunting cackles from the ordinary citizens.

I wanted to vomit. The brazenness was shameless…but…well, three years ago, I would've not only applauded this, but I would've probably written it and maybe acted in it too. But I'd have certainly shot down this amateurish execution of technique. Now I wanted to walk out but I sat there, determined to watch this travesty till its miserable end. I scanned the audience to see if there was somebody I could recognize…Professor Sastri maybe? Actually, no. He wouldn't personally attend such small-time plays although he was the chief puppeteer behind this and similar events and besides…ah, there he is! Amir was sitting four rows below, towards the extreme right. I doubted if he knew I was here and even if he looked behind in my direction, he wouldn't recognize me in this light. I decided to go home with him after the play. It'd also save me the trouble of hunting for an autorickshaw.

The play concluded with the 'accused' accepting their guilt and rubbing their foreheads on the floor and vowing to atone. They could have well been in Stalin's court. The crowd stood up and delivered a roaring applause. I slowly eased my way through the mob that now surrounded Amir. He didn't recognize me immediately but acknowledged me when I said, 'Let's go home together, Amir.' That attracted the mob's attention. 'Why don't we see you nowadays?'; 'Is it true that you aren't in Bangalore?'; 'Where have you been?'; 'You look so different!'

Amir didn't say a word in the car. Neither did I. As I towelled my face dry later at home, I looked at the mirror critically, running my fingers in my hair. Ratnamala was right. It felt like coir…white coir. The roughness of the skin on my face clearly showed the months of neglect it had suffered. There was no reason not to follow my hair and skincare routine at Narasapura. Why did I lose interest? Is there a relationship between the study of history and a loss of interest in one's desire to look good? I was curious to find out if such a connection existed.

We sat opposite each other at the dining table. Mutton curry for him, dal for me. I knew he was determined not to break his silence. I broke it.

‘How could you agree to direct such a nauseating script?’

He glared at me but said nothing and continued to eat.

‘I’m talking to you Amir.’ I glared back.

‘How did you decide it’s a “nauseating” script?’

‘It has zero creativity, it’s shabbily written and its subject is a perversion of truth. The fact that it proclaims that Babar’s mosque was destroyed is actually 0.000001 per cent of the truth. It conceals the fact that Babar destroyed a Hindu temple that had stood on the same site and built his mosque using the pillars and stones of that very temple.’

‘Really? Then it’s curious how you conceal the fact that Hindus destroyed a Buddhist temple on that same site and built this temple dedicated to Rama?’ he replied angrily.

‘This is the “history” that…it’s the frivolous argument that your comrade “historians” at JNU continue to peddle. Is it any coincidence that it’s the same history that Comrade Ramamurthy fed into the mouth of the character that played the prosecutor-historian? I can bet anything that Ramamurthy hasn’t read history in his entire life…Ramamurthy and activist-artists like him…I’ve been studying not just works of history but primary sources for the last two years. I’ve gone through most of the elaborate notes my father made and, believe me, I spend more than twelve hours daily doing just this.

‘Do those comrades even know that Muslim armies razed Jain and Buddhist monasteries, rest houses and entire temple complexes that once dotted all corners of Hindustan, Khorasan and Sinkiang? How do you explain the destruction of these structures in places as far-flung and geographically spread out as Bukhara, Samarkhand, Khotan, Balkh, Bamiyan, Kabul, Ghazni, Kandahar, Begram, Jalalabad, Peshawar, Charsaddh, O Hind, Takshashila, Multan, Mir Pukhaas, Nagar Parkar, Sialkot, Srinagar, Kanauj, Shravasti, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Saranath, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Vaishali, Rajagir, Odantapuri, Churhut, Champa, Paharpur, Jagdal, Jaajnagar, Nagarjuna Konda, Amaravati, Kanchi, Dwarasamudra, Devagiri, Bharauch, Valabhi, Gimar, Khambhat, Patan, Jalor, Chandravati, Bhinmal, Didwan, Nagore, Osean, Ajmer, Bairat, Gwalior, Chanderi, Mandu, Dhaar…didn’t the Muslim armies destroy them? Do you seriously believe the super historians of JNU when they say these were destroyed by some faceless kings belonging to the Shiva sect?’

He didn’t reply. There was nothing he could say, but the force of my own oratory surprised me. I knew he neither knew history in any depth nor had

enough shrewdness to save his face. A moment later, I realized that I had quoted almost verbatim from one of the pages of the second volume of Sitaram Goel's Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them*, which I had read only last month. We finished the rest of our meal silently.*

After I arranged the utensils back in their place, I brushed my teeth, washed my face once again and then sat on the bed. And waited. Amir didn't enter the bedroom. And then I recalled that this wasn't the first time we had slept on separate beds…rooms. His obstinacy was unreasonable of late. In the past, he'd usually soften after he felt that I had massaged his ego quite well but now…what was it? I wasn't prepared now for another round of humiliation but I'd decided to push myself beyond the limits of self-respect… Oh well, there was nothing to lose by trying again. I got up from the bed and entered the study. Empty. I walked up to the guest room. The door was closed and not locked from inside. Lights off, but he was there. I decided to knock… should I gently push the door open and go in and tap him softly with my fingers…several choices flashed past in my mind…should I feign anger for making me wait while he was sleeping here or do I ask him? Suddenly I felt let down. Insulted. All these choices meant exactly one thing. This closed door told me everything I needed to know…'I've rejected you Razia'. The fact that I had come all the way to the guest room to placate his ego had already settled the issue: I'd given up my self-respect and if I showed him that, it meant sinking ten additional steps further down. There was no point pushing the door. I tiptoed back to my bed and curled up in a corner. Then I remembered Ratnamala's comment on my appearance. Was that really why he was pointedly ignoring me? I knew that after forty, some women suddenly change and go to ridiculous extremes to somehow hold on to their fast-disappearing youth. And I was in the show business…I was an actor, who had suddenly abandoned interest in looking good…no, no, no, I had completely quit taking even the most basic care of myself. Was that it? Oh well! He was in the same business and in his entire life, I'd never seen him spend even a second on grooming himself…but I suppose that 'raw' look was part of his appeal…I mean, it wasn't mandatory to make love each time we met, but a reassuring touch or simply the warmth of lying in each other's arms…he's denying me even that? This severe reticence between a husband and wife? It was too much to bear. I stood outside his room again and this time, gently pushed the door open. It was as I suspected correctly, open. He's angry. I need to step down a bit and mollify him. Amir is childlike in many

ways. I tiptoed slowly and in the night's dull light, I could see him sleeping on his back. I noiselessly sat on the bed and put my hand on his chest and whispered,

'Why are you sleeping here?'

No reply.

'Answer me, Amir! You must answer me, my angry Amir! I know you're upset because your bibi doesn't come to you as often as she must. But you know me. No? It started with one book and then another and another and without my knowledge I was completely sucked in. Don't you know how I miss you? Give me some time…I'm writing a novel now and it'll take me about a year to finish it. Bear this separation till then…please? And like I've told you so many times, you drop in there whenever you feel like it.'

No reply.

'Oh come on! Don't sulk, not at your age…' I leaned down and kissed him hard on the lips. He accepted it but didn't respond. I withdrew and then looked at his face for a long time before asking him,

'At least tell me what's upset you this badly? If I've done something, I'm willing to rectify it.'

'Why have you begun to hate Islam of late?'

'Huh? I hate Islam? Any honest quest for truth is meaningless if it's coloured with personal dislikes and attachments. I swear on you, I've no hatred for Islam.'

'In that case, why do you repeatedly talk about the temples that Muslims destroyed in India and elsewhere?'

'Oh well, let someone show me proof to the contrary, I'll shut up. Every single Muslim historian of the past celebrates this destruction by giving to-the-point figures and names, and these figures tally perfectly with the surviving evidence. Despite this, the Marxist gang of historians fabricates tales about the "internal clash of Hindu kings" and Shaivas and Vaishnavas and similar nonsense. If you don't believe me, I'll send you the books I've read. If you don't have time to read them in full, you can read the relevant passages I've marked and find out for yourself.'

'No. You've joined the anti-Muslim brigade and you've been brainwashed. Just say you don't want to get out of their clutches.' He turned his back to me.

'Amir, I wish you realize the real difference between hatred and an honest quest for truth.' I repeated. He didn't say anything to that. I didn't budge

from my seat. A few minutes later, he said, without changing his position, 'I'm sleepy. You go get some sleep.'

There was no point. I didn't want to coax him anymore. I left his room and a few minutes later, sank into our marital double bed. My mind didn't try to dissect Amir's behaviour now. Instead, it began to dwell upon the nature of fidelity to truth, which the writer of a historical novel must possess. Suddenly, I detected a similarity between the sham that was being perpetrated in glorifying Tipu Sultan as a patriot and the charade that I witnessed earlier today at the open-air theatre. The same strand united the two. They were pretty alike in technique, but they were mere outlets for political propaganda. It didn't matter whether the subject of a literary work was historical or contemporary. What mattered was whether the writer was loyal foremost to truth. Today's play reaffirmed my conviction that Father was right: in the end, only truth matters.

I awoke early and didn't feel like waking Amir up or wishing goodbye. I washed my face till I felt fresh, took my bag, closed the door behind me, walked down the stairs stopped an autorickshaw once I was on the main road and half an hour later, was seated in a bus to Kunigal.

8

In retrospect, it was fortuitous that my manhood was smashed. Nobody used me in that disgusting manner like that mansabdaar after I was castrated and sent to Moinuddin's zenana. For a long time, I thought that it was impossible to use eunuchs for pleasure but then I learned from someone that Moinuddin was not interested in boys. Besides, that was a small zenana—less than a hundred people including the begums, kanchinis, servants and eunuchs. Nobody there used eunuchs for pleasure. I won the good graces of Udaipuri Mahal quite early after I was admitted to the badshah's zenana. She was very merciful and showed her affection for me quite openly.

Farsi was the most preferred language in the inner circle of the badshah. Vazirs, army generals, commanders, kotwals, pretty much every ranking official used Farsi. Although Turkish was used as well the badshah had a personal affinity for Farsi. It made for dignified speech. The badshah spoke Hindustani very fluently but he employed this tongue only in his dealings with the army and the lower classes like the mahouts, and horsemen with whom he had a personal rapport. Turkish and Arabic were common but Farsi was the language of the emperor. I practised hard to improve my Farsi but even after all these years, the idiom and some nuances of grammar escape me. People could quickly make out that I was not part of the administrative circle, which meant that I could be one of two things—a newly-converted Hindu or a Hindustani Muslim. But they didn't need to tell who I was from my Farsi—my skin colour and facial features were enough. The original Muslims of Arabia, Turkey and Persia treated Hindustani Muslims with undisguised disdain. A good command over Farsi ensured that their respect increased by just a shred. Whatever, but they did agree that I was handsome. In the end, I was still a second-class eunuch.

'Show more dedication to improve your Farsi and Turki. Try to learn it systematically,' Udaipuri Mahal advised me repeatedly. In her infinite kindness, she ordered the nazar of the zenana to appoint a Farsi tutor for me.

Hamdullah Kufi Sahib was the custodian of archives. One of the tasks of the vazirs, trusted ministers of the badshah, was to collect news and intelligence, which the spies sent over to Delhi from the various parts of the empire. They classified intelligence into different categories and unfailingly reported every piece of news to the badshah. The badshah retained only the most secretive intelligence and didn't allow it to slip out of his inner circle. The rest, he sent to the archives where custodians refined and classified it further. Like his predecessors who ruled the Mughal throne, this information was used to write the personal history of the badshah, which included all his achievements and an assessment of sorts of his overall rule. Which is why people who worked there had to master Farsi, Arabic and Turkish and had to possess expert knowledge of history. The archives were heavily guarded. Nobody other than those who worked there was permitted entry to this office.

Actually, a man of the stature of Hamdullah Kufi Sahib was not necessary to teach me Farsi. But he agreed only because Udaipuri Mahal, the badshah's favourite lover, had sent the request. However, as the days passed by, Hamdullah Sahib developed kindness and affection for me. I had to go to his home behind the Jama Masjid for my lessons, as the fort in which the archives were located was prohibited to me. His house, too, was a tiny fortress. Impenetrable walls that stood at the height of two tall men. There was a massive front door with a small opening through which a eunuch peeped to see the visitor first and let him in if required. There was a small garden in the compound. The main door led to the mardana, the men's quarters, while the zenana was located inside. Nobody inside the zenana would know who came in and went out of the mardana. My tuition room was located to the right of the mardana.

Hamdullah Sahib's sixty-year-old eyes glistened with attraction the moment he saw me for the first time. My stomach twisted with aversion but I didn't let it show on my face. He asked me about my background. I told him everything. His advice was identical as that of the others: 'You should've accepted the Religion of Light on your own before the war, then you wouldn't have had to suffer this sad state, but it's still not too late; if the badshah shows pity on you, he might even release you from your slavery.' My hopes were raised but were immediately accompanied by hopelessness: what would I do after I became free? Where would I go? I had no answer.

Hamdullah Sahib used to give me fruit, sherbet and sweets before starting each class. On the fifth day, before my lessons began, he began to gently

stroke my head and back. I looked at his face. It radiated extreme kindness and his shining eyes radiated love. This pious-looking learned scholar, at his age, desires me in *that* sense? I felt like vomiting. I kept staring at his face, a fact he didn't notice. After some time, I noticed a different sort of expression in his filmy eyes. I stared at his face in confusion. He stopped his caressing and patting and stroking and asked, 'Have you told me the truth about your birth, your parents…everything?'

I kept staring at him and shook my head, indicating that I didn't quite comprehend his question.

'I mean, were you really born to your parents? Or were you abandoned as a child and then adopted by the people you call your parents, who were childless? Or were you adopted at all? I know that Hindus have the custom of adopting children of other parents.'

'Why this doubt, Respected Teacher?'

'Just tell me the truth. Swear on the Holy Koran and tell me the truth.'

'I swear on the Holy Koran that what I've told you earlier is the truth. I was really born to the people I call as my parents. According to the custom of my previous religion, if my parents had to adopt, they would have adopted the child of my father's brother or the child of my sister. Moreover, if I was really not their son, I would've heard it from someone long ago. Please do not have any doubt.'

He emitted a deep sigh and said, 'Fine. Let's begin your lessons for today.'

I didn't ask him the reason for his question again. It was not my place to.

However, a month later, he told me the reason on his own. Hamdullah Sahib had a son from his first wife. When he was a boy of six years, he strayed in the crowd after the namaz at the Jama Masjid and was lost forever. All attempts to search him yielded nothing. Hamdullah Sahib had been unable to overcome this loss till this day. His first wife had died from this grief. On some days, it seems, he would talk about his son and his first wife in his sleep. His second wife, if she was awake, taunted him when she heard this—a fact Hamdullah Sahib himself told me.

'When I first saw you, I thought my son had returned. You have the same angelic face…if he was here with us he'd be a fine young man like you…but beware! My second wife hates me talking about my lost child. She taunts me with very bitter words if I mention his name even in my sleep! If I ever told her that you resemble him, she'll simply poison you. Keep this in mind

always and don’t tell this to anyone.’

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The news that Aurangzeb Badshah’s father, Shahjahan Badshah, had died in the fort at Agra quickly spread throughout the zenana in cautious, fearful whispers. This news had severe political repercussions as it would determine the momentous subject of the political fate of the entire Hindustan. In the past, Aurangzeb Badshah had rebelled against his own father and in the ensuing battle, roundly defeated him. Shahjahan Badshah was made prisoner in his own seat of power, the Agra Fort. Aurangzeb Badshah had then turned against his brothers. He defeated his two elder brothers and a younger brother in a deceitful battle and took them prisoners and then had them murdered. These murders were calculated and different. Aurangzeb Badshah first won the trust of one of his brothers and then fed him opium. It was then easy to capture him and put him in prison. Over time, he was slowly fed with poison till he finally died. Another brother fled the country after he was badly routed in battle. However, he was pursued till he ran out of men and energy and had to submit. He was killed shortly. But for some reason, he didn’t have his father murdered. Shahjahan Badshah was kept as a prisoner for eight years before he died of old age. All these happenings reached my ears in bits and pieces and I was filled with both dread and curiosity.

I decided to risk asking Hamdullah Sahib. I chose a day when there was nobody in the mardana.

‘Is it true, Respectful Master, I heard that Shahjahan Badshah has reached the feet of God in the Agra Fort.’

He stopped me with a wave of his hand,

‘You must always take a king’s name by his title—Badshah Shahjahan… well, in his case it is fine because I’m not sure if that title will be bestowed upon him.’

‘I did not understand. Can you kindly explain?’

‘See, after the badshah begins his journey towards heaven, the next badshah usually confers a title of honour upon him. This title will be affixed to his name in all the official records of the Empire. Once this title is conferred, everybody should address him by only this title and not his real name. Anybody failing to do this will face the punishment reserved for disrespecting an emperor.’

This was the vent I needed to probe further.

‘Please tell me the titles of the previous badshahs of Hindustan.’

‘Zahiruddin Babar Badshah, the monarch who founded the Mughal Empire in Hindustan, was honoured with the title Firdous Makani. His son Humayun honoured with Jannat Ashyani; Humayun’s son Jalaluddin Akbar with Arsh Ashyani; and Akbar’s son Sultan Nooruddin Jahangir honoured with Jannat Makani. Shahjahan has not yet been given a title and we must wait and see if he is indeed bestowed with one.’

‘Why do you doubt?’ I asked, in a low, intimate tone.

He didn’t reply. I decided to ask again.

‘This won’t go out of this room till I’m alive. I swear on the Holy Koran.’

He looked at me briefly and to my delight, decided to believe me.

He said nothing for two minutes at the end of which he began to slowly stroke his flowing white beard. His bright eyes now took on a remote look, as though they were gazing at the truth of the distant past. Then he spoke slowly.

‘I find it tough to believe that you know nothing. I’m very certain that the lies, which the badshah’s enemies, and the vile whispers which Dara’s group have been spreading, has reached your ears. Everybody knows about these lies and about the people spreading them…everybody, including the badshah. Equally, every true Muslim knows that whatever the First Alamgir, Muhiuddin Mohammad Aurangzeb does, he does it in the service of Islam’s victory. All the ulemas have supported him from the start and he continues to enjoy their wholehearted support. If the alamgir had lost the battle for the throne, Islam’s purity would have been polluted forever! But do you know what the real danger would be? The kafirs, the apostates, the impure, the zimmis and all such wretched creatures would gain the upper hand and ensure that Islam was completely erased from here. But Islam is not a religion to be erased. Nor will it ever be invisible. Which is why Muhiuddin Mohammad Aurangzeb Alamgir won the struggle and ascended the throne.’

‘You must show more mercy and explain the alamgir’s struggle in more detail.’

‘Oh! I had set out to explain that but…all right, listen. Shahjahan Badshah had four sons: Dara, Shuja, Alamgir and Murad Baksh. Shahjahan Badshah was blinded with love towards his eldest, Dara. He had decided very early to make him his successor. He was so attached that from a very young age, he kept Dara in his court and groomed him in statecraft. He made sure that Dara

was popular, influential, feared and well-respected by the vazirs, mansabdaars, kotwals and the rest. On the other side, he kept his other sons away, far away from Delhi by dispatching them as subedaars to remote principalities lest they pose a threat to Dara. He sent Shuja to Bengal, Murad to Gujarat and…do you know where he sent Aurangzeb Badshah? Deccan! Shahjahan Badshah knew that the dullard Dara's light would be dimmed the moment he was surrounded by accomplished warriors, solid statesmen and strategists who knew the nuances of pitting the enemy rank against itself. Moreover, Aurangzeb Badshah has always been a pure Muslim. Even in a raging battle where he was surrounded on all sides by the enemy, he would dismount his horse or elephant, turn in the direction of Qibla and do his namaz! This very sight would boost the fighting spirit of his Muslim soldiers by a hundredfold. Prophet Mohammad (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam)* used to perform namaz this way in the battlefield. No emperor, general or solider after him followed this custom…nobody….nobody except Aurangzeb Badshah! You tell me if you know of any emperor, any Muslim warrior who did this!' he looked at me.

I didn't know what to say and stared at him blankly. He asked me again.

'I…umm…I…I don't know history. You must show kindness and tell me.'

He was pleased.

'Hmm. I will. Some other day. But now don't you wonder what kind of a man was Dara? He used to imitate his great-grandfather, Arsh Ashyani Jalaluddin Akbar. You don't know, but there is a faction in this Mughal Empire that glorifies Akbar. Oh, you must see them extolling his greatness as the ideal Mughal badshah! They copy his so-called ideal of searching for the common thread that supposedly unites all religions and then urge everybody to follow just that unifying strand. He used to discuss the Bible with the foreigners, Zend Avesta with the Farsis, Talmud with the Yahudis and Vedanta with the Hindus. He would engage in laborious discussions with the Hindus to find out what teachings in their Vedas and Vedanta matched with the teachings in Islam—how did it matter if their religion of Vedas was the majority? Islam was the religion of the rulers! He prohibited people of one religion from converting people of another. He said converted people were free to return to their original religion if they wished. He withdrew jaziya, and abolished the pilgrim tax that Hindus were required to pay. He allowed Hindus to build new temples and renovate old and damaged temples at their

own cost…he…he did everything that wounded and weakened the might and purity of Islam. Akbar! He was an irreligious man! If that was not enough, he polluted Islam right *inside* the royal palace! You ask me how? He let his Hindu begums keep prayer rooms of *their* gods and he allowed them to perform their fire worship. These begums built their dwellings according to Hindu architecture. Now you tell me, if Islam is polluted on this scale by the badshah himself within his own household, how do you expect it to remain pure in the kingdom? Remember: Akbar is another name for a traitor of the Only True Faith!

'And his great-grandson, the Alamgir's brother Dara, inherited this same trait. I know how he used to invite all kinds of scholars and holy men from all religions and took lessons in the New Testament, Sufi philosophy, Talmud, Vedanta… Oh wait! He used to visit some Hindu yogi, Lal Das, very often. Also Sarmad, some Muslim fakir. And he used to expound elaborately on jihad—that it didn't mean we had to wage jihad against people of other faiths, that it was wrong to forcibly convert other people to Islam, and that jaziya was bad. Now the ulemas were naturally worried. If this man became the badshah tomorrow, Islam would be in mortal danger. And they were right, weren't they? No, no, no…*you* tell me if they were right!' He stopped and looked at me pointedly.

I nodded, knowing that it was the only response that would make him continue.

'But Shahjahan Badshah thought he had scored victory over his other sons. He had not fully understood the fact that a firm grip over the affairs of the Mughal court in Delhi doesn't mean much. A truly powerful badshah is one where even the remotest corner of his empire feels his power to the same degree as those in his court feel. And so, eight years ago when Shahjahan Badshah became seriously ill, he realized that he wouldn't live long. He decided to spend the rest of his days in the company of his favourite wife Mumtaz, whom he had immortalized in a tomb in Agra. The moment this news reached all corners of the empire, Shuja in Bengal and Murad in Gujarat declared themselves the badshahs of the Mughal Empire. Aurangzeb committed no such foolishness. He wasn't sure of what news to trust and he was unsure of the real state of his father's health and so he decided to find out for himself. He took a large army and set out for Delhi. On the way, he camped briefly at Gujarat and worked out a pact with Murad—they would split the Mughal Empire between them. Murad would become the

independent badshah of Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir and Sind while Aurangzeb would rule over the rest. Murad would get one-third of the treasury and Aurangzeb would keep the rest. They sealed this pact by swearing on the Holy Koran. He was so tactful, so willing to submit when time was not in his favour, and when the tide turned, he'd break any pact, the wondrous statesman that he is!

'Meanwhile, Dara had caught on to this somehow and came personally to stop him. But he was no match for the alamgir, who vanquished him in no time causing him to flee to Delhi. By now, Shahjahan Badshah understood what he had unleashed and sent personal invitations to all his sons to sit together and work out an amicable treaty. Aurangzeb Badshah was careful, he didn't go to Agra. He was certain that if he trusted his father, a band of deadly Tartar warriors would be waiting to butcher him the moment he set foot in Agra. When Shahjahan Badshah realized that he wouldn't come, he sealed the fort from inside. It would take months to break that fort and Aurangzeb didn't have time because on the other side, the defeated Dara was now amassing a massive force.

'Aurangzeb reached Agra and disconnected the water supply to the fort. Shahjahan Badshah had to surrender. Aurangzeb put his father under house arrest and appointed his trusted men to guard the fort and only then prepared to face Dara. He had the full force of Murad behind him as he prepared to launch the offensive against Dara. Murad, on his part, was drunk with the spectacular first victory against Dara. Aurangzeb seized this chance and organized a lavish party and in the party, fed Murad with inordinate amounts of liquor with the help of Murad's trusted aides, whom he had already bribed. Barely conscious, it was easy to divest Murad of his arms and capture him and pack him off to the large jail in Gwalior. Once there, Murad was tried by a qazi, a judge who was on the side of Aurangzeb. Murad was naturally found guilty and sentenced to death.

'With his rapidly-expanding power, Aurangzeb went after Dara and hunted him down relentlessly all over in Rajaputana, Sind, Kutch and Simistan steadily weakening him till he had no choice but to surrender. In the end, Dara was brought to Delhi and paraded in the streets in a wretched manner. The ulemas tried him and found him guilty of preaching beliefs that were forbidden by, and were against Islam. He was sentenced to death.

'Actually, I have heard that Aurangzeb Badshah himself recommended the death sentence. Dara was hacked into pieces and these pieces were piled

on an elephant and paraded through every street and gully in Delhi—it was a warning of the fate that awaited anybody who deviated from the tenets of the Only True Faith. In this way, the last fruit of Akbar's vile heritage was finally crushed and with it, our faith's foundations were reinforced. As for Shuja, he escaped to the forest and was killed by the tribal people.'

'But didn't Dara's supporters and Shahjahan Badshah's loyalists oppose Aurangzeb?'

'Eh? How could they even dare to dream of it? They had, by now, realized that Dara was a weak match to Aurangzeb Badshah in war, cunning, courage and cruelty. Shahjahan Badshah's supporters knew that the old emperor would die any day now—not only was he old, he was suffering from a disease which had no cure. Whatever the reasons, always keep in mind that courtiers have a keen sense of detecting the winning side and they switch their loyalties accordingly.'

Over time, I learned many other details. With his father safely imprisoned in the Agra Fort, Muhiuddin Mohammad Aurangzeb ascended the throne at Delhi and crowned himself in great haste as the Mughal emperor, bearing the title of Alamgir Ghazi. The haste was required to send the decisive message: he was now the absolute monarch of the entire Mughal Empire in Hindustan. Besides, he had other worries: while Murad was already dead, he still had to hunt down Dara and finish off Shuja. Crowning himself the Mughal emperor would give him the legitimacy, authority and sanction to carry out these expeditions.

Aurangzeb Badshah had crowned himself in Delhi, whereas Agra was the capital of the empire. Delhi paled in comparison with Agra's wealth, splendour and pomp. He had to therefore conduct the crowning ceremony in Agra and seat himself on the throne there—the final mark that truly proclaimed him as the badshah of the Mughal Empire of Hindustan.

But there was an even more crucial reason why he hurriedly crowned himself in Delhi. He was scared of losing his influence over his powerful courtiers. If he had crowned himself in Agra, he would immediately become the target of ridicule of his courtiers, mansabdaars, subedaars and the powerful diplomats and representatives of other Muslim countries. Getting crowned in Delhi ensured that he was openly proclaiming to the world that he had deposed his father, made him prisoner when he was still the badshah, and he had no qualms about it—the diplomats would send this message to their kings.

But why did Aurangzeb Badshah choose to keep his father alive when he could have killed him slowly, over several months by adding small quantities of poison in his food? Nobody would suspect murder. If he had spared his brothers, they were sure to gang up against him some day in future, an avoidable risk that he had preferred not to take. But Shahjahan Badshah? He was a captive in his own house and he could do nothing to save himself.

Nobody really knew what was in Aurangzeb Badshah's mind. The public could recall no instance of Aurangzeb Badshah breaking an oath he had taken by swearing upon the Holy Koran. But he would do the exact opposite, using well-refined tricks of conspiracy, and make it look like he was actually adhering to his oath.

Shahjahan Badshah breathed his last in winter, a week after the Makara Sankranti festival of the Hindus. The Hindus had many severe prohibitions regarding the celebration of their festivals. Despite this, I saw that large numbers of Hindus had walked the long distance from Delhi to the lowermost part of the Yamuna and there they paid obeisance to the departed souls of their ancestors. Aurangzeb Badshah, who had never set foot in Agra, then announced that he planned to celebrate his birthday in Agra that year—that is, eight years after he proclaimed in Delhi that he was the badshah. I knew it was going to be an extremely grand event. But this one would be the grandest, for it was his fiftieth birthday. Enormous quantities of gold, diamonds, pearls, rubies, silver, silk, elephants, steeds…the unimaginable wealth of the empire collected over eight years lay in Delhi while the grand palaces, stately forts, sprawling mahals and awe-inspiring buildings lay in Agra. Moreover, Agra had always been the Mughal capital.

The badshah decided to transport all that wealth to Agra and dazzle the whole capital with it, and ensure that word of this extraordinary opulence spread to near and far lands in Hindustan and outside. This exhibition was the necessary next step to command the fear and loyalty of his subjects, courtiers, nobles, tributaries, and kings and emperors of foreign lands. And so, 1,400 twin-bullock carts left from Delhi under the ruthless watch of some of the finest soldiers in the kingdom. But that was not all. Our entire zenana was ordered—together with its decorations, clothes and jewellery—to come to Agra. After all, the size of the zenana was another indicator of the extent of the badshah's power.

All the back-breaking work of planning, management, transport and supervision of a movement on this scale was beyond my imagination—it was

a mobile capital. All I could learn was that two groups were appointed. One group was a sort of advance party. It identified the best spots to erect a large swathe of camps. Once the zenana reached the camp, the second group would have already left the first camping site to search for similar camping spots further on the road towards Agra. The two groups had to work in perfect coordination to avoid delay and confusion.

Hamdullah Sahib told me the extent of preparation involved in transporting Arsh Asyani Jalaluddin Akbar Badshah's zenanas—one hundred elephants, five hundred camels, four hundred bullock carts and one hundred palanquin-bearers were employed for this purpose alone. Five hundred armed soldiers were engaged to guard this retinue and one hundred cleaners to clean and look after the members of the zenana. Five hundred servants were further hired to clean and smoothen the road. Not to mention the one hundred water-carriers, fifty carpenters and the many assorted servants for menial jobs in the camp. And then there were those who held the torch at night. Fifty leather-workers and about 150 sweepers were also included as a part of this retinue.

It was impossible to have an accurate count of the number of beasts and people in this vast human sea but I could discern, as a safe approximation, at least two thousand elephants, three or four thousand camels and thousands of servants. Hamdullah Sahib told me that he obtained the accurate count much later. Actually, a lot of workers weren't really necessary, as a well-made highway already existed between Delhi and Agra. It was just a question of pitching tents in the most comfortable locations and providing supplies to the members of the zenana. The camps followed the strict grading system as always: the Diwan-e-Khaas and the Diwan-e-Aam, reserved for the badshah and his inner circle, were kept separate. Tents for the badshah's favourite women followed a similar pattern. These special women had tents that measured ten yards long and six yards wide. The inner walls were decorated with exquisite paintings and embroidered with thin strands of silver and gold. A thick cloth, similarly decorated, separated the room of one begum from the other. The ground was covered with a luxurious carpet, three inches thick.

The same stricture was followed—no male eye could fall upon the women of the zenana. The guards, palanquin-bearers and every other male had to keep their eyes on the road at all times. Even an accidental glance elsewhere meant inviting hell at the hands of the nazar, whose band of eunuch-soldiers formed the first line of defence of these women. These eunuchs would flog the deviant man till the skin on his body was torn. This

would be followed by a proper enquiry, resulting in some suitable sentence, like blinding or amputating hands or legs.

It took two weeks for us to reach Agra. Larger the size, slower the pace.

I retained contact with Hamdullah Sahib with the same frequency even after coming to Agra. The archives too, were shifted to Agra and before long Hamdullah Sahib had a palatial house just outside the Agra Fort, befitting his stature. I visited him regularly as if it was my duty whether or not I had lessons on that day. This pleased him immensely. He used to caress my head at every meeting and talk to me in affectionate tones. In a few weeks, I had earned his love and trust so completely that he began to whisper the innermost secrets of and the goings-on in the Mughal Empire.

Very soon, I had first-hand—well, almost first-hand—information of the rebellions erupting in various parts of the empire and the schemes the badshah had hatched to subdue them. I knew in advance where war would break out. I knew the names of the generals who had been selected for promotion. I learned of Konkan, a place dotted with large mountains, and of the people who lived there, called Marathas. Some upstart leader of the Marathas, named Shiva, had dared to pose a challenge against Aurangzeb Badshah's might.

Hamdullah Sahib told me that Shiva was a coward who didn't have the guts to fight the badshah's army in an open field. He was a cunning strategist who had a thousand tactics in his arsenal. He would storm in usually at night or when the Mughal army's guard was slightly down and kill at random. Or he would lie in wait in strategic places and when the Mughal army passed, pounce from nowhere, cause confusion, and kill indiscriminately. In every attack he and his band would loot the Mughal army.

'In a very short time, Shiva's name has inspired fear in the hearts of not just our army, but in the entire Konkan area. Shiva had declared that his life's mission was to completely root out Muslim rule and establish a Hindu Empire. He had reached Surat and there, it was said that he had managed to destroy and loot large merchant establishments of foreigners engaged in marine trade under the protection of the Mughal Empire. The foreigners now respected him and openly ridiculed the Mughal army.'

Hamdullah Sahib then told me about Afzal Khan, the dreaded general of the sultan of Bijapur. Shiva accepted Afzal Khan's offer for negotiations and when they met, he killed the giant of a warrior by plunging iron claws into his body. After this, he launched a swift attack that shattered Afzal Khan's

army and whatever remained of it fled in all directions.

Aurangzeb Badshah soon realized that Shiva had grown too big too quickly. Shiva was now known as Shivaji, the ‘ji’ suffix indicating respect. And so, the badshah entrusted the task of cutting down this upstart to Jai Singh, one of his ablest generals. Jai Singh was a hardened veteran and a master strategist. He was from Amber, a once-powerful kingdom of Rajputana. He had lost his father when he was just eight years old and was immediately appointed as a general in the Mughal Empire. When he was thirteen, he ascended the throne of Amber and swore his loyalty to the Mughal badshah. Ever since, he participated in several decisive wars and proved that his allegiance was firm. He was familiar with Muslim traditions because he grew up amidst those traditions and spoke Farsi, Turkish and Arabic. He was well-versed in the principles of Islamic statecraft, administration, diplomacy and cunning battle strategies. Jai Singh was older to Aurangzeb Badshah by ten years but he was the most trusted among the badshah’s generals. Jai Singh had stood by the badshah when he had rebelled against his own father and captured the Mughal throne. But nobody knew why he had supported Aurangzeb Badshah…was it because he was convinced of Aurangzeb Badshah’s eventual victory? Or was it simply prudence—or fear—that if he had not supported him back then, the badshah would trample him to dust? The answer was beyond even Hamdullah Sahib’s guess.

The first thing Jai Singh did upon his arrival in the South was to instigate all the kings there against Shivaji. He lured Sultan Adil Shah of Bijapur with a promise of reducing the annual tribute he had to pay to Aurangzeb Badshah. He entered into secret negotiations with the Portuguese, who had set up a flourishing port in Goa, promising them Mughal support if they joined hands with him to destroy Shivaji’s naval fleet. The Portuguese agreed because if Shivaji’s navy was destroyed, they would command a monopoly over the sea.

Jai Singh sent personal invitations to the heads of hundreds of tiny Hindu kingdoms and dispatched Brahmin officers under his command to carry out the actual negotiation. These Brahmin officers relayed a crafty message: ‘The mighty Jai Singh, who has come to give battle to Shivaji, is a Hindu. And we are Brahmins who feel honoured to work for him. But who is Shivaji? A petty mountain robber. What assurance do you have from him that he won’t loot you? If you join us, he will be powerless against our combined strength

and you can forever eliminate your fear of being attacked by him.'

Jai Singh also made a clandestine deal with Atmaji, the chief of Shivaji's cavalry, which consisted of more than three thousand horses. He bribed Atmaji's two brothers and another general, Kaharkoli, with enormous sums of money. In return, they had to open up the ranks upon receiving Jai Singh's signal while the battle was raging. Jai Singh's intrigues worked. The battle ended in a fort called Purandhar, where a hopelessly-cornered Shivaji was left with no other option but to call for truce.

An overwhelming number of warriors who fought under Jai Singh were Rajputs. While Shivaji agreed to the terms of the truce, he did not fully trust the Mughals. That was because Jai Singh promised him that Aurangzeb Badshah would make him the overlord of Deccan if he accepted his suzerainty. Jai Singh invited him to come to Agra to personally meet the badshah. Shivaji's trusted aides warned him against the journey as they were certain the badshah planned to murder him at Agra. But Shivaji went nonetheless.

Once there, he was treated dishonourably, in stark contrast to what Jai Singh had promised him. He was insulted in the open durbar and Shivaji retorted harshly. Aurangzeb Badshah was furious. The plot to murder him had already been hatched. This incident was the exact excuse they were looking for. *He is now under house arrest. We need to wait and watch how he'll actually be murdered.*

Word of Shivaji's arrest reached the ears of regions far beyond the borders of Agra and Delhi. The mountain rat that had eluded every trap set by the formidable Aurangzeb Badshah and become the lone challenger to his might for so many years was now, finally in prison. The badshah had emerged once again as the supreme strategist. Courtiers, mansabdaars, subedaars, ministers were dumbfounded with amazement. The badshah was unchallengeable, he knew no defeat. 'His father, Shahjahan Badshah, didn't come anywhere close. As for Dara, Murad, and Shuja…hah! It's purely Allah's grace, which has put such a strong emperor on the throne!' was the general refrain that echoed throughout Agra. Citizens did their namaz with greater fervour than before. On his part, the badshah clandestinely instructed his courtiers to ensure that the news of Shivaji's arrest reached everybody. Gradually, this instruction was altered. The 'ji' suffix of respect was to be dropped whenever anybody wanted to take his name. He was now just 'Shiva'. Every day, new instructions emerged from the durbar. His prowess,

fame and name were steadily being debased, yet this served to increase the number of people who were curious to see the Maratha. Around the time he was imprisoned, Yusufzai and the Afridis in Afghanistan revolted against Aurangzeb Badshah. But this was another opportunity sent by Allah—the badshah decided to send Shiva, the nimble mountain rat, to quell them. His undisputed command in mountain warfare would be of enormous value to the badshah's troops. Once the job was completed, he could arrange for Shiva's murder and blame it on the rebels. However, Shiva fell mortally ill and it was pronounced that he would die from this illness. This was good—the badshah would now be spared the disgrace of being called the murderer of Shiva. When it was clear to Shiva that he wouldn't recover, he took the durbar's permission and dispatched his personal bodyguards to his home country. A dying man had no need for bodyguards.

The summer that year was exceptionally severe. Or was Agra's summer crueller than Delhi? Heat sores erupted on our backs, forcing us to sleep face down. Life was comparably tolerable in the palace and zenanas. Kanchinis and other servants hung large mats of khuskhus grass and splashed water on them every hour or so to keep the heat down. A fan measuring three yards long and a yard wide made of khuskhus reeds was suspended by a rope from a beam above, which was continuously tugged to fan the begums. These servants earned their respite from the killing heat in this manner, a respite that was denied to eunuchs. We drank copious amounts of water. Agra never ran dry.

The recompense for that insufferable summer arrived in the form of timely monsoon. As was the practice, nobody wanted to miss the first drops of rain. The begums ran out into the courtyard and got drenched, still fully covered in their burqas. The Yamuna looks more enchanting in Agra than in Delhi. It filled up quickly and the non-stop rain swelled it enough to touch the fort walls.

With the rains came a sudden, unexpected tiding, which quickly transformed itself into a city-wide whisper: the mountain rat had outmanoeuvred the badshah. The rat had escaped but the badshah had responded instantly by dispatching a small army on swift horses, which were specially trained for lightning-fast pursuits. They sped in the direction of the mountains. The guards who had patrolled Shiva's prison were as good as dead. To the citizens, the story of Shiva's escape was more daring and romantic than his capture by the badshah. He was undoubtedly made of

different mettle to actually escape from the hawk-like clutches of Aurangzeb Badshah.

‘The badshah is anxious now. If this wretched mountain rat manages to reach his hole in the Deccan, the Alamgir’s dream of bringing the whole of South under the Mughal Crown will be dashed forever,’ Hamdullah Sahib said.

The badshah shifted his entire administration back to Delhi after his birthday durbar festivities concluded. By now, I could converse with Udaipuri Mahal in fluent Farsi and I could sense that her kindness towards me had increased. She promoted me as the junior supervisor of her mansion. This meant that I had more free time on hand, most of which I spent at Hamdullah Sahib’s house. I also had relatively more freedom. I was not confined to the zenana. I wandered in the affluent localities and the gullies and sometimes went to the deserted and weather-worn areas built by the earlier sultans in the old city. My solitary journeys revealed that Delhi was not one single city but a cluster of many old cities, and each one had a history of its own. I decided to find out these histories from Hamdullah Sahib.

After his return from Agra, the badshah began a major exercise of tightening the administration. One prominent change was to fortify all those principles of Islamic administration and jurisprudence that had fallen lax, owing largely to Akbar Badshah. He personally examined every law and purged any law that violated Islamic tenets.

Jahangir Badshah had not been as religiously corrupt as his father, but his devotion to Islam was not absolute either. To his credit, he ordered the destruction of temples here and there and commanded his men to piss and shit on the idols. But it was Shahjahan Badshah who had instituted the systematic destruction of Hindu temples. He had prohibited both the construction of new temples and the renovation of existing temples throughout the Mughal Empire and embarked on a policy of converting the infidels into Islam using any device that worked. He tried to allure his Hindu courtiers, officers and common citizens to Islam by offering them higher salaries, gold, power and pelf. Where it did not work, he threatened stubborn Hindu officers with transfers to remote provinces and, in some cases, with dismissal. He introduced a hefty pilgrim tax for Hindus who went on pilgrimages. He appointed Shamir La Houri and Muhib Ali Sindhi as officers whose task was to create appropriate positions for Hindus who were willing to convert to Islam.

The grandfather's efforts were half-hearted and his father, though zealous, was slovenly. What they had begun was completed by Aurangzeb Badshah with none of the tepidity and sloth that characterized his predecessors. He pursued his goal of Islamizing the entire Mughal Empire with single-minded zeal and discipline—Islam determined what was permitted or forbidden. Every law that was written and every order that was pronounced was utterly faithful to Islamic tenets. Nobody could fool the badshah, who had the Koran right on the tip of his tongue. His command over the Holy Book surpassed that of the brightest scholars and theologians. He could accurately interpret even the most obscure and tough verses and he had an infallible understanding of the aims and goals that the Koran laid down for the Faithful to follow. Allah was the only true king. The badshahs who ruled various parts of this earth were mere representatives of Allah. Every badshah's goal and duty was to propagate Allah's name to all corners of his empire.

No subject was allowed to worship, indeed, even to take the name of a god other than Allah, for nobody was equal to Allah and any person who did this was a traitor. Taking the name of any other god was the highest crime that a citizen could commit, the punishment for which was death. It was the sacred duty of every Muslim to strive in the path of Allah and every such effort to discharge this sacred duty was known as jihad. Jihad included all endeavours to convert infidel kingdoms, Dar ul Harb—to the kingdoms of the Faithful, Dar ul Islam—by waging war against them. If the Faithful won the war, the vanquished infidels automatically became slaves of the Faithful. Jihad was a perpetual struggle because thousands of infidel kingdoms existed in the world and they all needed to be converted to the Kingdom of Islam, because the ultimate goal of the Kingdom of Islam was to erase all divergent beliefs until the Only True Faith stood firm on this earth.

Aurangzeb Badshah, being one of the purest Muslims, put all his energies into carry out his part in fulfilling this noble goal. He was a benevolent badshah who spared the lives of those who converted to Islam. He knew what the Sacred Koran said, 'When the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem; but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.' (Koran,9.5.6) And further, 'Say to the Unbelievers, if now they desist from Unbelief, their past would be forgiven them; but if they persist, the punishment of those before them is already a

matter of warning for them. And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah altogether and everywhere; but if they cease, verily Allah doth see all that they do' (Koran, 8.38–39).

A non-Muslim had no political rights. Not just that. He had no right of any kind to live in a Muslim kingdom. If indeed he was allowed to live, it was a temporary reprieve. His position was slightly better than that of a slave and he was recognized by the title of zimmi. A zimmi was allowed to live only because he agreed to bind himself with a zimma, a contract with the government. He was prohibited by law from enjoying the same rights that a Muslim citizen did, and he had to pay the jaziya, a tax that allowed non-Muslims to live in a Muslim kingdom. He had to bend down from the waist while paying the jaziya, according to the stricture that the Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) had laid down: 'Fight those who believe not in Allah… until they pay the Jaziya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued' (Koran, 9.29). The Muslim who collected the jaziya was to sit in an elevated seat at all times while accepting it.

Non-Muslims also had to pay kharaj, the special land tax from which Muslims were exempted. Then there was another tax levied for the upkeep of the Mughal army. A non-Muslim was not allowed to join the army as a general, warrior or horseman, but he could only serve in a menial position. He had to strictly monitor his behaviour at all times, showing humility and respect when talking with Muslims. He was not allowed to wear jewellery or possess weapons. Zimmis were prohibited from celebrating their festivals and fairs and were forbidden from assembling in groups, building new temples or renovating existing ones. In several cases, if a Muslim coughed loudly with a '*khaakh'* sound before spitting, the zimmi had to respectfully open his mouth and allow the Muslim to spit into it and swallow the spittle without showing a trace of discomfort or disgust on his face.

His testimony held no weight compared to a Muslim's testimony in any court. A Muslim who killed a non-Muslim faced no punishment—killing a zimmi was not a crime under the law. In the end, all of these strict measures and harsh taxes and insults were meant to motivate a zimmi to forsake his Faith of Darkness and accept Islam.

When Shahjahan Badshah was still alive, Aurangzeb Badshah had issued a farmaan, the Royal Order. This farmaan commanded all Hindu traders and businessmen to pay 5 per cent sales tax and all Muslim businessmen, 2.5 per

cent. However, after returning to Delhi post his birthday celebrations, Aurangzeb Badshah amended this farmaan, which exempted Muslim businessmen from paying any sales tax. Hindu businessmen, however, had to continue paying the same rate. This was a device to wipe Hindus out of business. But the badshah didn't stop there. He issued another farmaan—all Hindus occupying the posts of chief accountant (peshkar) and accountant (diwaniyan) were dismissed from service with immediate effect.

I listened to all of this with unwavering attention and in the end asked Hamdullah Sahib, 'It is eight years since the badshah ascended the throne. Why did he wait for so long to introduce all these measures? Why did he not do it earlier?'

'Why did he not do it earlier? Hm? Why? Why don't *you* tell me?' he asked me with a broad smile, as if the answer was self-evident. I shot him my usual blank stare. He shook his head kindly and said, 'To know the answer to this question, you must study history. You must understand that some circumstances in history and the insights they give us remain remarkably uniform. Do you know what Zia-ud-din Barani, one of our own historians wrote? No? He wrote, four hundred years ago, what Iltamush, one of our kings who ruled in this self-same Delhi, did. During Iltamush's time we were not as powerful as we are now. We were surrounded by Hindu kings. To the south of Chambal lay the powerful Jhansi. Gwalior and Navar were controlled by Pariharas. The Chauhans were in Ranthambore and the formidable Jalores in the southwest of Rajaputana. The Yadavas in the north had the entire route to Alwar in their iron fist and made life extremely difficult for us to rule the land encompassing Bayana, Thangir, and Ajmer. Imagine the condition of the sultan ruling from Delhi!

'The ulemas repeatedly questioned Sultan Iltamush: why aren't you waging jihad against the infidel kings? Why aren't you imposing jaziya on unbelievers in your kingdom? Why aren't you running your empire according to the tenets of Holy Islam? They were right; after all, their job was to counsel the king on the urgency of spreading the True Faith as wide as possible and as soon as possible. To them, the sultan said, "Today, the number of Muslims in Hindustan is akin to the pinch of salt that sits ignored in a corner of a large plate of food. We must wait a few years till our numbers grow and then we can, like you say, offer the Hindus the choice between Islam and death. You must have patience till then."

'Do you know why I told you this? Aurangzeb Badshah did not have

complete control over the empire, although he had declared himself the badshah even when Shahjahan Badshah was alive in Agra. Now the mountain rat from the Deccan has been caught once, but has managed to escape. That's not a big cause for worry because the Maratha kingdom is under our control. Besides, the Mughal army stationed there is ours.'

'But you do have Rajputs like Jai Singh?' I interrupted him.

'They're Rajputs just in name. People like Jai Singh derive their royal titles from the mercy of the badshah. The day his benevolence for them ceases is the day they stop bearing their pretty titles. Today, he has been dispatched to the Deccan and the instant the badshah orders him to go northeast, he must go without a word. Jai Singh and everybody like him know nothing apart from battle tactics. They have no skill and have learned no other craft or trade to survive in this world if they quit the military. Really, they have no option—either they obey the badshah's commands or they are sacked from the army. Do you expect *these* people to rebel?

'The badshah has thought these out very carefully before embarking on his endeavour to bring the whole of Hindustan under Islam. You will watch with your own eyes how in just a few years all the kingdoms from Gujarat to Bengal, from Thanesar to Golkonda and beyond…I don't know all their names…thousands of large and small principalities will have mosques and minarets proudly touching the sky. The temples of the mushriks, these worshippers of many gods, will be razed to the ground and their filthy idols used as steps upon which the faithful will tread to enter mosques and offer their prayers to the all-Merciful Allah. I know that only the highest place in Heaven has been made ready for the Alamgir Badshah,' Hamdullah Sahib finished with a contented glow on his face.

I was unable to witness the actual consequences of the new farmaans because the zenana, indeed, the whole of Delhi was completely Muslim.

The badshah was unable to spend as much time as he would have liked with his favourite Udaipuri Mahal. Affairs of the state consumed most of his time and he also had to pay attention to his other begums and women. Udaipuri Mahal used to often tease him on this but everybody knew—most of all, she knew—that these were lovers' quarrels. She didn't dare risk even a slight change in tone. He was Aurangzeb Badshah. When he was gone for days, sometimes weeks together, the boredom and loneliness would start to tell. Entertainment was aplenty but she needed someone to talk to, and so she frequently sent for the begums of the amirs and other officers. The begum

usually spent the whole day gossiping with these women. The zenanas of the amirs were better informed of the goings-on in the outside world than the zenanas of the badshah.

On one such occasion, Udaipuri Mahal ordered me to hasten to Dilshad Khan's mahal and inform Shabana Begum to see her on the morrow. Dilshad Khan lived in Tughalaqabad. I had been to his mansion several times in the past and I had earned the mercy of his begum, Shabana. Because Tughalaqabad was far I begged Udaipuri Mahal to arrange for a horse to make my journey faster. She granted my prayer immediately.

Every small and mighty Muslim who had raided Delhi did not reside in the city he had conquered but invariably built a new city in the neighbouring areas. It really did not matter if the defeated king was himself a Muslim. The reason, as I learned later, was rooted in the practice of comprehensively ransacking and setting the entire city on fire. They had an additional advantage: the almost-never ending stretch of fertile plains ensured that there was always enough land to build newer and newer cities. And then they had the luxury of free manpower in the form of the prisoners they had captured in war who were subsequently put to use as unpaid slaves. And so, in a way, the whole region that was called Delhi was also a collection of old, ruined and nearly peopleless cities.

Some of these had very sparse population. Those who chose to rebuild their homes, which were destroyed during wartime, now lived in such cities. Some amirs who preferred to maintain a respectable distance with the durbar renovated crumbling mansions in such cities and lived there. There were also the other reasons—these amirs were so immersed in a life devoted to debauchery that they were loath to participate in wars and they dreaded the badshah's summons dispatching them on a campaign. Some were scared to be dragged into court intrigues and preferred to stay far away from such dangerous games. But I had no opportunity to see these old cities closely. My travels were restricted to the Delhi of the Mughals, at most, its outskirts. There was really nothing noteworthy in this Delhi except the Qutub Minar and some streets. I had seen the entire city a few times and very soon I realized that it held nothing compelling for me.

The opportunity of riding a horse was really rare and without Udaipuri Mahal's graces, I was sure I wouldn't have been given one. The horse that was allotted to me that day was of a lower stock, a beast not trained for battle. Definitely not an Arabian steed. My mind was suddenly fixated on Arabian

steeds…battle-trained beauties that exuded raw power. Tameable only by men with extraordinary daring, it required immense courage and practice to even mount them. I had spent many, many months undergoing such rigorous, potentially fatal practice in a life that I now only had a misty recollection of. Years of zenana service didn't allow me to even dream of touching a beast as fine as that. I mounted the horse and signalled it to move, loosened my shirt and let my hair fall. As the horse picked up speed, I rediscovered the exhilarating rush of riding a horse.

The main door of Amir Dilshad Khan's mansion was shut. I knocked softly and realized that it was not bolted from inside. There was no response. I knocked harder two more times. No response still. I pushed it open slowly, taking care to open it just enough for one person to enter. I was permitted to do so because I was a eunuch who served in the badshah's zenana. Moreover, I was a messenger carrying an order from the badshah's zenana. But my limit ended at the small garden that opened out in front of me inside the zenana. Beyond the garden was a large wooden door. I saw a young woman hurrying towards the main door with a baby perched on her waist. She wore a long skirt and blouse with a veil that covered her chest. A slave. She was a Muslim, no doubt, but she wasn't from the original Muslim stock. If she wasn't a slave, she wouldn't have dared to cross the mardana and come all the way here to open the main door. As she neared me, I was drawn to her face, my eyes fixed on her. *I've seen her somewhere*. *I know her*. Now she was facing me. I didn't take my eyes off her. She held my gaze. Ah! Her expression changed. I knew she had recognized me. Her face widened in pleasure, a broad, joyful smile, then a blushing red, and immediately, a plaintive cloudiness. Her eyes swelled and the tears that broke blocked her vision. She shivered lightly and bit her lip. Fear? Suddenly she turned and fled like a frightened deer. The baby on her waist began to emit a high-pitched cry, which became feebler as she ran farther away from me, until I no longer heard the baby's wails.

I plopped down on the spot, my body shaking uncontrollably. I sat there for I don't know how long.

'Who are you and what do you want?'

I looked up to see a woman of about fifty looking down at me. A slave, like the other woman who had fled.

'I'm a…hijra…' I stammered.

'I can tell that by looking at you. Nobody would've dared to enter the

main door just like that! What do you want?' she demanded, addressing me disrespectfully in the singular, in a harsh tone.

'I come with a message for Shabana Begum from Udaipuri Mahal. I must deliver the message personally to her.'

'Please come with me.' Her tone instantly changed. We crossed the mardana and the hall beyond it, which ended at the door to the zenana.

Shabana Begum did not attempt to hide the joy she felt when she heard that Udaipuri Mahal expressed a desire to meet her. I suddenly became her special guest. She addressed me in the plural and had a servant bring me cool sherbet.

'You have travelled this far alone. You must have lunch with us. I insist,' she said warmly. Then she ordered another servant to attend to my horse and ensure that it was well-fed and well-rested. But my mind was elsewhere. I debated whether it was a good idea to ask Shabana Begum to send for the woman who first came to open the main door. But everything would be lost if she was not who I thought she was. No! If she was really some other woman who merely resembled her, why would she behave the way she did? All those myriad emotions showing on her face…lashing like waves until she wept and finally fled… Or maybe I'm really hallucinating.

~

I didn't go to Bangalore for six months after that play. Bricks, eh? My novel consumed me. I spent all my time unearthing information from the primary sources that spoke about Aurangzeb. No source was insignificant or trivial. Without this kind of work, it was impossible to bring the actual historical truth out in my novel. As I read up, my novel started to move on its own and I began to scribble down unconnected bits as they occurred to me, to give them shape later.

I left for Bangalore when I was satisfied that I reached a stage in the novel where I could take a break from writing. Amir wouldn't have cooled down yet, after what had happened last time. But I must see him. It doesn't make sense to push it too far. I'll try to woo him back…six…okay, maximum eight months and I'll be back in Bangalore for good. I missed him. Suddenly another thought struck me—I wasn't sure if I could completely sever my renewed ties with Narasapura. I realized it meant a lot more than I could fathom. I was born there and had grown up there and after the mad, youthful

passion that had separated me from it…twenty-eight years ago…time was inconsequential to the ties that bind a person…and now the bond I felt with Father…sitting in his room on his bed, studying everything he had studied for over three years…I knew Narasapura wouldn't go away even if I wanted it to. It held the roots of my heart.

The maid who opened the door to my apartment was busy wiping the floor. I made small talk. All good with your family? Husband? Children? How many? She warmed up to me.

'I don't see Amina Banu? I'm very hungry. Can you make something for me? Please?'

'Oh? I'm so sorry. I'll be glad to make something for you but there's nothing here. Vegetables, groceries…everything is in the house in Shivajinagar. Sahib stays in Shivajinagar. In his house. Before shifting, he asked Amina Banu to continue cooking for him there; she refused because it's very far and quit. I come here every day and clean and lock this flat once my work is over. Nobody comes here.'

I said nothing but didn't take my eyes off her. She knew that I knew that she knew more. She turned her eyes away from me but stood rooted to her spot.

'Tell me everything.'

'I…I…don't want to get into this,' she stuttered.

'Tell me everything.'

'I…I…don't know…'

'Tell me everything.'

'Okay…I'll tell you on the condition that you swear to me that you won't tell anybody that I told you this…I thought you knew already…' Her eyes were fixed on the floor.

'I swear on you I won't tell anybody.'

'Sahib has taken another wife. The girl is a teacher in an Urdu school. She's twenty-five years old. Her father sells fruits in a roadside shop opposite the Shivajinagar bus stand. He and his family live in one of the gullies in Shivajinagar, near sahib's house.'

I heard nothing after this. The woman standing…cowering before me was not real. Vacuum. So he had done it. He had used the ultimate weapon that the Sharia law equips every Muslim man with. The weapon every Muslim man safeguards as if his life is at stake. His parents had died a few years ago but he had stayed on here, in this flat in Malleswaram, preferring to rent out

his ancestral home. But now he's gone back…it was quite obvious. Apart from us, the apartment complex was populated entirely by Hindus. Typical middle-class Hindus. Studious. Conservative. Most of the women had graduate degrees at the minimum. And we were known to almost everybody here because of our background in the film industry. It was natural that Amir would have felt very embarrassed to stay here with his second…wife.

And now I felt discarded.

I walked past her and sat on the bamboo chair.

'I need to go…to work in other houses…'

I closed the door behind me after she left. After sometime, I decided to head to Shivajinagar, and hold him by the scruff of his neck and demand… what? I already knew what he'd say. And now, I dialled his number.

'Amir…'

'I know.'

'You married again?'

Silence. I could feel him fumbling for a response.

'You married again?'

'I haven't pronounced talaq on you.'

What did that mean? That he hadn't completely abandoned me? That he had the right to marry two more women? That he didn't need my permission to marry another woman? That he could pronounce talaq on me at his whim? That it was my fault that he married again? I struggled to find my voice until I heard a click at the other end.

~

I didn't ask Shabana Begum about the slave girl. Lunch over, I immediately mounted my horse and left for Udaipuri Mahal's zenana. Was she caught before she could jump into the jauhar fire? If that was it, then was…Mother caught, too? And Sister? Grandma? Where are they now? I couldn't get myself to think about them working as maids and slaves, treated worse than brutes. And along with it, the edifice of self-consolation that I had built all these years with the bricks of the belief of their honourable deaths was smashed. Now I *had* to find out what had happened to them but how? I decided to risk asking Udaipuri Mahal and if she showed enough mercy, who knows? I could even to go Devagarh and find out. Actually, Hamdullah Sahib was the person to ask. After all he was the custodian of the royal archives.

There was no information that his ever-hungry archive didn't consume and store. I was sure he would help me. If he found nothing in the archives, he would write to the suba of Rajputana and find out. Was I that naive to blindly assume that the womenfolk who had decided to do jauhar had actually died? Or was I scared to deal with the possibility of…this possibility that they were captured and… My peace was now ruined forever and I knew I didn't have the strength to endure the distress, this horror. I ate less and spoke even less. My sleep was tormented. I didn't want to share this with even Hamdullah Sahib.

Shabana Begum arrived the next day, stayed overnight and left the following day. She saw me once and gave me a benevolent smile. I suppressed my desire to ask her about the slave I had seen. I was an exemplary slave; I had mastered the art of voluntary suppression, the first rule of slavery.

After two torturous weeks, Udaipuri Mahal sent for me. 'Take this.' She put a large gold pendant in my palm. 'And take a horse, rush to Shabana Begum and give it to her with great care. It belongs to her. She had worn it when she last visited us. No, actually I liked this and asked her to leave it with me, so I could get one made for myself. It's very beautiful, isn't it?' I nodded. 'She volunteered to gift it to me but it doesn't befit our stature to accept it. Now the jeweller has made one for me. Remember, when you return this to her, you only need to tell her that the zenana jeweller has made one for me. Do you understand?' I nodded again and felt a strange elation.

This was the first time that Udaipuri Mahal had entrusted me with a task so important. It was more a question of how well I kept her trust. As I rode the horse, an idea occurred to me. I would further polish my behaviour with Shabana Begum, endear myself more to her and then, at an opportune moment, reveal my desire of seeing the slave in private. I knew this was perhaps my only chance.

Shabana Begum welcomed me, oozing warmth and kindness. She took the pendant and said, 'Oh, but why did you have to return this? It was my humble gift to Udaipuri Mahal Sahiba. But now that she has decided to return it, it is the duty of this slave to obey her will. Please convey this to her.' It was clear from her tone and demeanour that she thought that I belonged to the inner circle of Udaipuri Mahal Begum. Somebody ordinary wouldn't have been trusted with an expensive pendant. I started to say something but she cut me off with, 'I didn't know if it was proper for me to send this news

to you but Allah be praised, for He sent you here! It seems Tabassum, our slave here, was your wife. When you first came here, I didn't know anything about her past. When Khan Sahib brought her here after purchasing her, she was already a mother of a six-month-old baby. Khan Sahib told us she'll be here as a servant. After two years, she was with child again. This time she delivered a girl. She now has a boy and a girl. Remember when you came here the other day, she came to open the main door? She came till the main door only because she was a slave, for no respectable lady would dare to step out like that. That's why when she saw you, she became frightened and ran inside and the first thing I learned after I returned here after savouring Udaipuri Mahal Sahiba's kindness was that she was taken ill with fear. Her illness lasted two days. You might ask how I know all this about her especially when there are so many slave women here—you tell me, is it possible for me to enquire and get such details about each one of them? Anyway, after much coaxing she revealed that she was terrified that her husband would have known the sin she had committed. I was shocked to learn that just four days ago she had jumped into the well in the backyard. But Allah is merciful. One of our hijras working in the garden saw this, jumped in and stopped her from drowning by holding her by the hair. She yelled at him, saying, "Nobody has the authority to prevent me from dying!" but his grip was firm. A maidservant raised an alarm and before long, several people gathered there. Tabassum was rescued. Luckily, she hadn't swallowed much water. Believe me, my breath stopped when I heard this unfortunate incident. Of course, I came to know of this after I returned.'

I said nothing for a very long time, but was aware that she was looking at me. When I spoke at last, I said, 'I want to have a few words with her privately. Can you please arrange that?'

'I will arrange for it. You please stay here,' she said, and went inside. After some time, a woman of about fifty came and asked me to follow her. We reached the cattle pen at the right of the mahal and she asked me to wait there, saying that Tabassum would join me in a while.

I thanked her and looked at the pen idly. I saw the endless rows of cows lost to the world, eating the heaps of fresh green grass and the other rich fodder specially stocked there for the beasts. I wasn't sure if these animals were being fattened for their meat or for their milk. Curiously, there was so sign of even a single calf anywhere. I thought they were tied up separately… and then I heard the sound of faint steps coming in my direction. I looked to

my left and saw that Shyamala was walking slowly towards me with her head bent. She was wearing the same dress she had worn when I first saw her. She stopped a few feet from me, her gaze fixed on the ground. I tried to gauge her expression and assumed that the dark weight of a failed suicide attempt made her avert her gaze. She was evidently sorrowful. I didn't know how to start. I couldn't ask her anything. Every question, I knew, would be, painful. I decided to tell her my story instead.

'They broke the strategy of my army at the Vishnu temple quite easily and very rapidly, and before I could even kill myself, made me their prisoner. Then they dragged out the Vishnu idol and broke its arms and nose and stomped it and stood over it. And the mansabdaar who led the battle used me like a woman. Then he took me to his zenana and allowed his friends to use me like a woman. After some months, he sold me for one thousand rupees to an amir who took me to his mahal and broke my testicles, turned me into a eunuch and appointed me as a servant in his zenana. After that, his begum gifted me to Udaipuri Mahal. I'm her slave now.'

I could tell that she listened to every word but her face showed nothing. It was stony. Expressionless. Emotionless. After I finished my last sentence, she suddenly lifted her head and looked at me directly in the eyes, and the first tears broke. I looked at her weeping face, showing no expression. I felt nothing.

'You had a dagger. Why didn't you plunge it in your stomach before they could capture you?' she asked after a while.

I hadn't expected this question. It felt like a slap. She had insulted me thoughtlessly. But why didn't I do it? And then I realized why. A dagger was meant to be used only when both the opponent and you were bereft of weapons and a hand to hand combat was inevitable. Wasn't I aware then that the dagger was meant to take one's own life, something far preferable than being captured alive? Wasn't I aware then that this would be my plight if I was captured? I knew it, yes. But why did I allow myself to be captured? Why didn't it occur to me then to simply plunge that dagger into me and die? The fear of death…or was it more a shameful lack of courage to kill myself? However disgusting this felt now, was it more a fundamental love of life that made me surrender? Was it some feeble glimmer of hope hidden somewhere inside? Of course, all such ruminations occur only in hindsight and not at the moment. Even if I had time for this kind of leisurely analysis, it could have swung any way.

I suppose she understood why I didn't answer. Now she was sitting directly before me. She said, 'It's okay…I mean…I understand why you didn't stab yourself. Remember the time you saw me here the other day? I could clearly see the surprise in your eyes. There was fire everywhere…wild, blazing fire in the palace courtyard. Mother-in-law, Sister-in-law, your grandmother, all of them jumped into the pyre, chanting "Har Har Mahadev". Other women jumped in too, eyes closed, the sound of "Har Har"… resonating within them, not looking at the monstrous flames. I remained there looking at them till the very end. As the daughter-in-law of the royal family, I should've gone first, should've marched to the fire tagging along the pallu of my respected mother-in-law. But I stayed behind…hesitation…whether death would come instantly or if the fire would cause intolerable pain. Looking at all those courageous women I felt inspired and at length, rushed, strengthening my faith by reminding myself that I was going to commit jauhar, that my life would be united with Lord Shiva. But when I neared the pyre, the blazing flames leaping out seemed to rise up and strike my face and body. I was terrified. In a fraction I stepped away even as I noticed the women jumping in with a frenzy. I stumbled, caught amidst that collective march towards valiant death but somehow managed to move away from the crowd. My mind began to think of safe possibilities. I knew that it was the custom of this enemy to ravish the women of the vanquished, but I now began to think of exceptions. After all, not everybody was like that…there could exist people like Prithviraj Chauhan who treated the women of his defeated opponent honourably…he looked upon them as his own sisters, daughters and mothers. But even then, as now, I knew these were excuses to avoid facing the reality of my own cowardice. I had wavered at that decisive moment…I should have closed my eyes and jumped in. I didn't. Once that moment, the moment that urges you to die, slips away, it'll never come again. I've experienced hell many times ever since. The kind of experiences, which made me want to die but I lived through every hell because I couldn't muster that state of finality that had led me to stand on the edge of that fire-pit in our palace. But it came to me again, the day I saw you here. Wretched Meheboob pulled me out and put me back here to suffer all over. I don't know if or when I'll gather the same kind of courage.'

I wasn't upset with her for running away from committing jauhar. Not all men died after they were defeated in battle and not all women committed jauhar. Which was why we had so many slaves and so many hundreds of

thousands of non-Muslims in remote villages and towns of this vast Hindustan who somehow lived under the harsh yoke of jaziya. Like her, I had been scared to die and had chosen surrender. My experience matched hers. She had turned her back from the pit. I hadn't stabbed myself with my dagger. And now I felt immense sadness for her.

'I won't ask what happened to you after you were captured. I know it'll add to your pain…I know you've undergone the same plight as thousands of women like you have undergone. I know what they do. I know you have three children. I saw one that you were carrying that day.'

'Learning that you are pregnant is the most dreadful experience that women like me encounter here. The dread begins the day your master finds you desirable enough to repeatedly pull you into his room. But he is not the source of that dread, his begum is. She begins to spew jealousy like a serpent and will begin to inflict varieties of misery upon you, and she will simultaneously work harder to ensure that she is *still* desirable in his eyes. I mean, imagine, she's his begum and she has to play-act like a common whore just to make herself attractive to him at all times. And here I was. The former crown princess of a kingdom. I swear upon you. I never once lowered my dignity like all these other women…whatever their reasons…by acting cheaply. I was content in my corner. I shivered in disgust each time Khan Sahib called me and I prayed that he never would. Each time we were together he was furious because I didn't respond to any of his attempts to arouse my desire. He called me a piece of wood. It was hurtful, but I didn't mind.

'There is also something else I must tell you. Of my three children, the first one is yours. The mansabdaar who captured me calculated the time after the first child was born and told me that it was the result of my marriage when I was still a mushrik. But because I became a Muslim when the child was still in my womb, he said the child automatically became Muslim and he named my first-born Ibrahim.'

I felt a sudden rush of warmth in my heart when I heard this. It was like a feeble gust of pleasant breath telling me that all was not lost. Moinuddin's barbaric tongs had crushed my male virility forever and pushed me into the zenana, but here was the indelible proof of the continuity of my lineage. I was a eunuch-slave-father, but a father still. He was six years old now. I felt overwhelmed as I looked at this delicate woman, the mother of my son, Shyamala. I felt that the bond that had tied us together in marriage had

suddenly grown deeper and inseparable. I wanted to get up and go to her and tenderly caress her hair for a long time but my mind alerted me to the consequences of doing so. I was definitely sure that Shabana Begum would have sent at least two spies to watch over us here in this cowshed. Merely touching her hair was enough to invite fifty whiplashes or a round of stoning or who knows, even death. When I spoke at last, my voice was dry,

'I…want to see him. Can you bring him to me?'

I began to visualize my son. Six years old. His eyes, mouth, nose and forehead would have formed properly. Did he resemble me? Or my Respected Father? Or my grandfather? Or did he take after his pretty mother? Or her mother? She didn't say anything so I said,

'I know you're hesitating to bring him to me because he's now the slave son of slave parents where he should've been the prince, but I don't mind. I have accepted my condition as my fate. Acceptance of this miserable existence as fate is the best way make peace with it. Besides, he's too young to know what fate is and by the time he knows what it means he would've accepted slavery as his natural condition. But he's still my son.'

'What you say is true and I have accepted it like you, but that's not why I'm sad. It is natural that you desire to see your son but I have two more children both born from my womb. You didn't say you wanted to see them.'

That stung. I didn't know what made her mind twist my words in this manner. I had known all kinds of strange women in these many years of service in the zenana but I didn't anticipate *she* would think this way and I also felt sorry for myself at not having understood this. She continued, 'I know Islamic law for good measure. All children have equal rights, whether they are the children of the begums or those of slaves, servants or kanchinis. Only the status of the mother is different. Do you know how these begums—the legally-wedded wives—constantly plot to make sure that education and other benefits are denied to the children of the slave women who work for them? They can, because they typically hail from powerful families of noblemen and these slaves are either captured in war or come from utterly poor families. If the child of one of these slaves begins to show superior intelligence early, the begums won't hesitate to have them poisoned. The mansabdaar or a person of similar rank doesn't usually have the time or patience to show equal measure of love to all of his children and so, over time, it has come to such a pass that only the children of the begums are treated as the legal children. If there's any rivalry among children when they

grow up, it is between the children of the four begums—the four wives that a Muslim man is permitted by law to marry. In a very real sense, my children have no father. Khan Sahib has never once cast even a look at his children born out of my womb. I think he may be scared of Shabana Begum. Or maybe he is afraid of his other begums. Or maybe of all of them. Or he may simply not have any feeling for slave children.'

This was a revelation. I didn't know that these children didn't enjoy a father's love and care despite living with him in his own house. I wanted to tell her to get her children right now so that I could shower all that the poor little souls had missed, but I said nothing. As it now stood, my feelings towards her were unclear; so how could it be clear towards the children born to her out of adultery? I decided to first sort my own feelings out.

She said, 'You know, I was overjoyed when I learned that my first-born was born to the seed of our dynasty. These people named him Ibrahim but my mind was constantly thinking of a name befitting our dynasty… Vishnuswaroop Singh, Narayan Singh, Vijaybhaskar Singh…would you agree these are worthy names? These contemplations helped me forget the reality of my wretched state and I spent all my time coddling my baby. But I was surprised when I felt the same overpowering love for my two other children born to…forcible lovemaking. I don't know how to say it. It was like my babies had no one to pamper them, nobody to heed their cries…'

I stared at her. She didn't flinch. Her eyes showed the confidence that comes from one who speaks only the truth.

'I haven't told this to anybody so far. There was no one who'd listen to all this, much less understand. Worse, this kind of talk feeds their appetite for ridicule. Besides, who else should a wife turn to other than her husband to share her sorrows?' She looked at me. I realized that she had completed all that she had to say.

'My dearest Shyamala, I feel like I've been reborn today. I had never dreamt of ever seeing you again. You still address me as your husband and you've treated me with the same respect and love. I ask nothing more but I must tell you my truth—they have crushed my manhood. I am your husband but I am not a man anymore. I'm also a mere slave now and I'll remain a slave until my current master releases me from slavery or a new master buys me and grants me freedom. I'm not foolish to fantasize that my freedom will come some day, when I know there are hundreds of thousands of slaves like me and none of them have ever been set free. And you are like me, a slave.

And there are hundreds of thousands of women like you. It was my good fortune that I was able to meet you today because I was here on an errand…I had to return your mistress's jewellery. I don't know if we'll ever get another chance to meet each other. I don't mean to sound hurtful but I want to caution you—and myself—that it is useless to be swept away by emotion and pin false hopes on the strength of such emotions. Now, bring all your three children. I'll see them to my heart's fill and leave.'

Before she could reply, I heard the voice of a female servant calling out her name. She came in, panting as she spoke, 'Amir Sahib has come. He's asking for you. If he finds out that you're here talking to a stranger and worse, that his own begum sahiba arranged it…come now!'

Shyamala looked at me hurriedly, fear clearly showing on her face, and ran. I looked at her till she disappeared from my sight. There was nothing left for me to do here. I rose slowly. Amir Sahib wouldn't dare ask me anything, further the moment I told him I was sent by Udaipuri Mahal, but his mind would begin to suspect what I was doing in the cowshed. Besides, he'd have already seen my horse tied right at the huge door at the entrance to his mahal. Now, I walked towards it.

Back on the horse, my mind went into a sort of delirium. Amir Dilshad Khan had returned from a long tour and now he wanted the still-very-young Shyamala. She was a mother of three already and presently a nursing mother and even in the slave's attire, she looked very pretty and youthful. Despite looking at her closely and spending so much time alone with her, I couldn't tell until she herself told me that she had three children. Pretty, pretty Shyamala. Let me bide my time and when I get this scoundrel Dilshad Khan alone, I'll stab him to death. And then I'll hunt that Moinduddin Turani and thrust my knife straight inside his heart…no, he deserves worse. I'll rip his stomach apart first and then slowly chop his intestine…he had my manhood crushed…but first I must obtain a horse for myself to accomplish all this… after killing one, I must ride my horse and stab the other with the same dagger…my dagger must drink the blood of these two villains… A hundred such pictures flowed in my mind. The horse trotted on at an easy but comfortable pace.

I didn't visit Hamdullah Sahib's house that evening. When I went the next evening, he was beaming.

'Oh! You've come! I was waiting to tell you this delightful news. The badshah has issued a farmaan to demolish the Vishwanath temple in

Varanasi!’ I was stumped for a moment. Then I understood that the badshah was doing what was expected of every devout Muslim ruler: destruction of other, well, especially the temples of the idolaters. By then, the Mughal Empire was rife with regular reports of subedaars, amirs and nawabs destroying temples in the regions under their control and using the idols and other temple material as steps for the mosques that they erected on the site of those destroyed temples. Such reports were not new to me, but for some reason it reminded me of a long session where a suddenly-rapturous Hamdullah Sahib showed me some records and said they proudly proclaimed the might of Islam. The essence, he said, was that about fifteen or twenty thousand temples had been destroyed throughout Hindustan since the fierce gale of Holy Islam swept the land and now held sway under Badshah Aurangzeb. ‘By demolishing the infidel temple of Rama in Ayodhya, Firdous Makani Jahiruddin Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty, merely continued the hoary tradition laid beforehand by Ghaznavids, Ghoris, the Slave dynasties, Khaljis, Tughlaqs, Nizamshahis and Qutubshahis. Only that vile sinner Akbar—may his soul burn in hell!—stood out like a terrible nightmare in blocking the continuance of this holy deed. The rest had earned merit by destroying the temples of the infidel mushriks. But Aurangzeb Badshah is holier than all of them put together! Like I’ve told you many times, he waited till he had absolute control over the empire. And now he has issued the farmaan to demolish the idol-temple of the kafirs and if my experience guides me well, he will wait for the reaction of the mushirks and then issue another farmaan to demolish the temple at Mathura.’

I couldn’t sleep that night. It was seven years since I had completely abandoned the gods that failed to protect me and my beloved Devagarh. But my faith in this new god—this god that they wanted to forcibly impose throughout Hindustan—wasn’t absolute. This god reigned everywhere and his reach was expanding everyday. Every temple they destroyed, they replaced with mosques and they used the broken idols and stones of the temples to build this replacement. They were unstoppable and I had no doubt in my mind that very soon this would spread to all corners of Hindustan. I had not stepped out of Delhi but Hamdullah Sahib told me that thousands of places of darkness were already destroyed but it was not enough. The effort was ceaseless and he was happy that it was always underway. The final goal after all, was to establish the Religion of Light on this earth. And as Hamdullah Sahib said, Aurangzeb Badshah had now immersed himself

completely in this noble task and had already accumulated tremendous virtue. And Hamdullah Sahib knew everything—he could recite from memory the names of dynasties and kings, their achievements and he quoted names of the books in which this information was recorded. Besides, he loved me like I was his own son and on my part, I had no one to turn to apart from him. I was convinced that Aurangzeb Badshah was the best emperor the Mughal Empire ever had.

But ever since I returned from my visit to Tughlaqabad where I met Shyamala, all my apprehensions returned and everything was shaky once again. My visit suddenly made me confront a life I thought I had erased completely. And now, after I heard of Alamgir Badshah's farmaan, my faith in this new powerful God was violently shaken. Actually, I was nowhere. My faith in Lord Vishnu had been shattered at the exact moment I saw his idol being dragged out, broken, and trampled upon. My faith in this new God was not complete because I was badly jolted when Hamdullah Sahib told me of the farmaan to destroy the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

This consumed me throughout the night and till the next afternoon: that was when I made up my mind to test my faith in Islam. I could think of no better way of doing this than to accompany Hamdullah Sahib to Kashi and witness with my own eyes the destruction of the Vishwanath temple. I could evidently not participate in the actual destruction but I could watch it. I had had my answer, my heart had not fully accepted Islam; the vestiges of my faith in Lord Vishnu remained. I hoped the sight of the destruction of the Vishwanath temple would erase these vestiges and I could finally become a pure Muslim in every sense.

The badshah had chosen Kashi to begin his holy mission because Kashi—what was its other name? Ah! Varanasi—was the holiest site, the one place which all the Hindus of Hindustan regarded as the most sacred, as the very centre of their faith. When Hamdullah Sahib told me that Aurangzeb Badshah knew the Koran by heart and knew its meaning better than the best of scholars, he was not exaggerating. His farmaan to destroy the Vishwanath temple proved beyond doubt how zealously he adhered to the strictures concerning the kafirs. Witnessing the destruction would help me earn merit and gain me a place in heaven, and my name would be included in the group of the valiant who had served the noble cause of Islam.

9

Kenchappa was out in the fields that afternoon and the house was quiet as Lakshmi reread what she had written so far. Giriyanna, the new servant, was cleaning the cowshed. *Too much of history. The narration needs to be more artistic but that would mean diluting the historical reality of the time. However, if I add more and more historical reality, I must abandon artistry. Where is the balance I'm looking for? Pointless.* She put down the notebook and set out for the farm. Her routine was set. A quick survey of the farm first thing in the morning, followed by another survey of the fields. En route, she would look up at the coconut trees, verify the count of the coconuts and track their ripeness though this exercise wasn't really needed. Kenchappa was trustworthy and he knew what to do but she was becoming like her father, supervising and giving directions. After a bath and breakfast, she would enter the study.

One morning while she was walking in the garden, she heard Giriyanna calling out her name. 'Madam, your son has come! He is sitting on the portico. Lakshmamma told me to hurry up and fetch you.'

Her face showed the joy she felt upon hearing this. She had last seen Nazir two years ago. *The last time he came here…oh well…the tensions between Amir and me were already high. Although we weren't together, we weren't separated when Nazir was around and Amir spoke to me only when it was absolutely necessary… I'd been to Bangalore when Nazir was here on his previous vacation and I'd taken care of his comfort. Amir and I hadn't quarrelled, but he was displeased because I used to go to Narasapura and stayed there for days on end, immersed in my study of history.*

She began to wonder what—and how much—Nazir knew. *Did he come here directly from the Bangalore airport or did he go to the flat in Malleswaram before coming here? Or did he go to Shivajinagar? Had he informed his father about when he was arriving in Bangalore? Did he know that his father now had a second wife? He didn't tell me—not even a phone*

call or a letter.

When she reached the house, the long green Toyota car greeted her eye immediately. Some seconds later, a well-built man sporting a long black beard like an Arab emerged, wiping the car with a wet cloth. She crossed the threshold and entered the house. Nazir was deeply engrossed in offering namaz, facing Qibla, in which direction lay the most holy city of Mecca. He saw her with half-open eyes and, preferring not to let himself be distracted by anything, turned and refocused them towards Qibla. She looked at him. Pyjamas, the kind Arabs wore. A long, loose, flowing shirt that ended around the knee. A beard about one and half inches neatly trimmed. Pencil-thin moustache. Neatly-cropped hair pushed back and covered with the white skull cap worn while offering namaz. A personal mat—his own janamaaz—that every Muslim carried when he was travelling. She entered her study and sat on her 'writing' chair.

Nazir entered the study some five minutes later, folding the janamaaz in his hand. She pointed to the chair opposite her. 'Ammajaan, have you experienced the incredible strength that fills up inside you after you finish namaz? The kind of strength that comes from knowing that there's no God other than Allah, and that I need to bow my head before nothing in this world! All that a person needs to do—whether or not he does other rituals—is say the namaz five times every day. No power in the world will be able to conquer him. I say this from experience—I haven't missed it a single day!' he said as he sat down on the chair. She didn't respond. When she last remembered, he spoke fluent Kannada at home: after all, his parents were Kannada theatre and film artists. He also spoke Kannada with his friends and with people that came home from her world of cinema and stage. And he had just a working knowledge of Urdu. But now he spoke entirely in an Urdu laced heavily with Arabic words, many of which she couldn't understand. The grammar, pronunciation and accent were different. He looked at her, waiting for her to say something.

'Prayer should bring you peace. Its aim is to systematically reduce man's arrogance. Any prayer that promotes a feeling of superiority over others, that says that you won't bow down to any other God feeds a dangerous kind of haughtiness.'

His expression visibly hardened as he glared at her and when he spoke, he didn't attempt to hide the fury in his voice. 'Ammajaan, I've come from so far! It's not pleasant to argue with one's mother about religious matters. I'm

really upset, but because you raked it up, let me tell you: it's clear to me from what you just said that you haven't stopped worshipping many gods. But there's little I can do for people who insist on remaining buried under the weight of ignorance!'

He spoke exactly like the ultra-zealous folks who refused to acknowledge the existence of gods other than Allah. It was what she had been studying for the last four years. She wanted to tell him, with hundreds of examples, what that kind of fanaticism had unleashed upon the world. But this wasn't the time. He had come from so far just to see her. So she said, 'Son, look at the books in this room. Your grandfather spent twenty-eight years of his life studying them and I've been studying them for the last four years. Things like monotheism, polytheism, differences between cultures…these are subjects that we should study seriously if we want to talk about them. So let's leave that. You tell me, how have you been? How's life in Saudi?'

'Ammajaan, Allah be praised! It is the Land of the Prophet's (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) birth and it's wealthier than any other country in the world. You can't measure a country's wealth by its gold, diamonds, pearls or its advances in aerospace or rocket science… Petrol! Petrol is wealth. Hike the price of a barrel by just five dollars, and see how the arrogant "advanced" countries immediately crumble to their knees! And you know, I'm sure, that only Muslim nations have this power and among them, Saudi, the land made holy by the Prophet's (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) birth is the mightiest yet. Actually, why not? It is the land blessed by the most merciful Allah. Look at your India. The moment you land here from your flight, what do you see? Filth, squalor, disease, hunger and sickening poverty. You have thousands of excuses to explain this disgusting state of things but you carefully avoid mentioning the real reason: India has never truly accepted Islam in its purest form. You make a big show of honouring Islam, but you know and I know it's all a political drama. You pretend to respect Islam but secretly worship false gods. And yet you want India to prosper? How is it even possible?'

'Child, you hold a masters in petrochemical engineering from an American university, so correct me if I'm wrong. I recall reading somewhere that petrol was formed when the juices of various species of plants and animals existing millions of years ago seeped underground and changed their properties over time. Today's desert nations, including Saudi Arabia, were once home to a variety of life forms now extinct. But you attribute this

scientific fact to Allah's mercy like a typical Arabian mullah.'

Nazir was simmering now. If this was somebody else, he would've shown his disgust by ignoring them pointedly. But this was his own mother insulting the most revered Islam, and that made it even worse.

'I don't need lessons on how petrol was formed. But why don't *you* tell me why petrol was bestowed in such abundance only in the land, which was to become the future birthplace of the Prophet (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) and not in India, which worships multiple gods? You need an open mind to accept the answer to this question. But then Allah Himself needs to shower His infinite grace upon you if you are to be enlightened about His glory. Till then you can't realize the miracle He has conferred upon the world. Only he attains enlightenment on whom Allah casts His merciful eyes. The rest live a life of ignorance and inevitably reach hell. I have immense love for you because you are my mother. But I also pity you. I don't know how I can uplift you.'

It was clear to her that like countless young men who went to work in the Gulf countries, he too was seduced by the extremely puritan version of Islam that he saw there. In shops, offices and factories, people would stop doing whatever they were doing the moment they heard the azaan call, and rush to the nearest mosque for namaz. Some would perform namaz standing at their workplaces. A minuscule percentage didn't do even that. According to what she heard, Muslim migrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were earnest to prove to the locals that they were as pure. They took great trouble to heed every azaan call and rush to the mosque. She could sense the same fervour in Nazir and deduced that what had begun as an effort to prove his credentials to the local Saudi Muslims gradually developed into a deep-seated, almost blind belief, the kind of belief that made him speak like this. It wouldn't be easy to get him to see reason and explain the values of scientific temper and tolerance in a short time. She decided not to push him. He was dangerously mired in the religion whose founder-Prophet (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) preached that fidelity to the faith was the foremost and that it was approved and sanctioned to forsake—even sacrifice—your parents and brothers and sisters if they came in the way. She decided to change the topic.

'What would you like to eat? I'll get it prepared for you.'

'What do you get here?'

'We usually eat ragi balls and some rice. If you insist on eating chapati, I can send someone to Kunigal to buy the flour. There are plenty of vegetables

in the backyard. You tell me what you like. And there's no shortage of milk and curd and butter.'

'You belong to the Vokkaliga caste. You do eat meat?' he asked knowingly.

His pointed reference to her caste stung. She wanted to tell him she was still a Muslim, but decided not to because she had no faith left in Islam anymore.

'I'm a Vokkaliga and we do eat meat, but we don't eat it daily. We don't cook meat in the kitchen. We prepare it either on the portico or in the bathroom stove in a separate earthen pot meant only for that. We use separate earthen utensils for preparing meat and we don't mix these with the regular utensils. Only the menfolk cook meat. We don't use the regular plates, the meat is served in a large dried leaf and after eating, we throw it away and wash the vessels and hang it on top of the roof of the bathroom. The idea is to discourage meat-eating, which is derived from the basic ideal of non-violence towards animals. Your grandfather was very deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and had given up meat completely. After coming here, I've also given up eating meat. Animals have as much right to live in this world. Humans don't have the right to kill animals for food. The philosophy and culture of this land holds that animals weren't created purely for man's pleasure.'

He shrugged.

'Incredible! Anybody who knows even an iota of science knows that this is utter nonsense.'

She decided to let it go.

'I'll tell Lakshmamma to make rice and a broth of greens. There's plenty of curd. If you insist on meat, you'll need to take your taxi and go to Kunigal and eat in a restaurant. Your wish.'

He said nothing. She waited for a minute, then rose and went in.

He sat there alone till lunch was ready and came out when Lakshmi called out to him. She gave him water to wash and put his food on the plate. He asked for a spoon. She poured a generous quantity of ghee on the plate, mixed the rice and the stew with it, and ground it with her fingers till it was almost semi-liquid and handed him the plate. She sat there watching him as he ate and then mixed another helping. She fussed and complained that he wasn't eating well. When he finished that, she made him curd-rice and added a pinch of salt to it. His features softened suddenly. She was sure she detected

a sign of sentimentality.

While he washed his hands, she readied the bed in the study and asked him to sleep for sometime. He lay down. She went out and gave lunch to the driver and once he was done, she finished her own.

When Nazir awoke about an hour later, she was sitting on a chair by his bedside. She asked, 'Where are you staying in Bangalore?'

'Hotel Sharif Mahal.'

'Why aren't you staying with your abbajaan?' she asked making no effort to hide her surprise.

'I called home to tell you and Abbajaan than I was visiting. The phone service told me the number was disconnected. You don't have a phone here and I didn't have grandfather's number. I called Imitiaz. I don't know if you know him. He lives near Grandfather's house in Shivajinagar. He was surprised that I didn't know that Abbajaan had married again and was living with his new bibi in the big house. He asked me to call back after half an hour so he could give me Grandfather's number. I asked him what was happening. So he told me that you—my ammajaan—was living in some faraway village. What could he do? He told me this is what happens if non-Muslim girls come into the fold and get converted. It's not the same as marrying a true Muslim girl. It seems everybody is talking about this. I spoke to Abbajaan. He was delighted to hear my voice and said he'd come to the airport. He said he'll get the flat cleaned up and arrange for a cook till I'm here. Though his second bibi was younger than me, she didn't really need to follow purdah to appear before me, because I'm mehram as far as she's concerned. I understood. If I stayed at Grandfather's place, you'd surely come there to see me and that would really embarrass Father. When he came to the airport, I told him I'll stay at Sharif Mahal. He didn't say no but he didn't take me home to introduce his new bibi. I guess he was embarrassed.'

She didn't want to talk about her son's father's second marriage.

His tone when he narrated this was remarkably polite. She looked at him and sensed a certain softness that was missing earlier when he had argued with her. He wasn't the religion-fuelled Nazir anymore. She knew that he didn't understand the fact that the reason for this sudden transformation was the food that he had just eaten, mixed and served with love by his mother.

'How long is your vacation?'

'Six weeks.'

'Why don't you stay here then? You can go to Bangalore whenever you

want to meet friends.'

He didn't reply to this. 'You get a bus every fifteen minutes from Kunigal to Bangalore. Or you can hire a car for as long as you want to stay here.' He didn't reply even now. It was clear he wasn't interested. 'Have you thought about getting married?' she asked, changing the topic.

Silence again. She repeated the question.

'If I could get married just by thinking about it…' he said.

She knew the routine. Young men like Nazir who worked abroad would tell parents to look for prospective brides. When they came to India on vacation, they would talk to seven or eight prospects, select one of them, get married and return with the wife. But Nazir's case was a little tricky. Razia was almost wholly cut off from the Muslim community for four years. And then there was the issue of Amir's second wife. Finding her son a non-Muslim bride was unthinkable. A good idea would be to advertise in the papers. The American-university Masters tag-cum-well-paying-Saudi-job was sure to draw a decent number of responses. Was it impossible to find a girl minus all the stifling restrictions of religion? And it occurred to her that if the answer to that was yes, *he* wouldn't agree to marry someone like that. She opened her mouth to say something but he had lapsed into sleep again. She looked at his face. Everything about him was Arabic; dress, beard, moustache —everything screamed out to the world that he was a Muslim. But this kind of emphatic assertion of their Muslim identity had become commonplace of late among Indian Muslim youth. Another thought occurred to her. Was it mere coincidence that he graduated in petrochemical engineering and took his first job in Saudi? *He was such a pretty baby! How I wanted to teach him to keep an open mind, to look at things without the tinge of religion attached to them.* She shook her head sadly. She had failed to be a good mother. Locations. Shooting. Theatre. Speeches. And now when she thought about it, she realized that she had completely missed his steady but logical growth into an orthodox Muslim under the upbringing of his equally conservative grandparents. Her eyes didn't leave his sleeping form. He turned in his sleep and changed position. He opened his eyes in a kind of start. An hour had elapsed. He looked at his watch and sat up straight.

'What happened?'

'It is time to do the Asar namaz!' he said, swinging his legs down from the bed, and then almost ran out of the room.

She followed him to the bathroom. He dipped the mug into the huge brass

vessel, took it out and began to do uzzu. He made his niyyat and recited Bismillah. Then he washed both his hands till the elbows, gargled, took a few drops of water into his nostrils and washed them. He ran his fingers through his beard, washing it thoroughly till the roots. He washed his fingers and toes as if he was stringing beads and ran his fingers along his ears and then all over his body, and washed his right hand and right leg and finally, his left hand and left leg. He repeated this ritual three more times and began to recite the Du-aa in clear Arabic accent. His pronunciation was flawless.

'*Ash-hadu alla ilaha illallahu wahdahu la shareeka lah wanna mohammadan abduhu* (I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and He is Alone. He has no partner. And I bear witness that Mohammad is His servant and messenger. O Allah! I pray to You. I bear witness that there is no one other than You who is worthy of prayer. Make me of those who are repentant and of those who purify themselves).'

He recited this as he walked to the study. He unfolded his janamaaz on the floor, wore his skull cap, sat down and began to perform namaz. She realized she had forgotten most of the duties, the farz, which he recited.

'…*Ashadu Allah ilaha illa Allah wa ashadu anna Mohammad rasulu Allah* (I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and that Mohammad [*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*] is his Prophet and messenger…)' He repeatedly chanted this verse at specific turns in the namaz. Then he turned his neck to the right and chanted, '*Assalam aleikum warahmatullah*' and then turned it left and chanted it again. She knew he was done with his namaz.

She watched him fold his janamaaz and put it on a chair.

'Should I get some tea?'

He nodded.

She entered the kitchen to tell Lakshmamma to make tea and saw Kenchappa there. His face clearly showed displeasure even as he hesitated to say whatever that was bothering him.

'Awwa, madam: I don't know how to say this…but you are one of our own. You're our Gowda's daughter. I know you've polluted your caste in the past but you're still our own. We don't mind if you get into the kitchen and touch our vessels and bathroom and water. But your son is a Turk by birth. I'm telling you because you understand these things. He has entered the bathroom and touched the water and polluted it. We must empty all that water and purify it by washing it clean with tamarind. I must draw more than six buckets of water from the well. Lakshmamma is angry.'

Lakshmi suddenly felt sweat break all over her body. *How did I miss this? But this isn't the time to argue with him and really, there is no point trying to get him to see reason. No amount of calm reasoning will change him or Lakshmamma. He has been set in his ways for years and even if he saw reason, there was no way he'd antagonize the entire village and people of his caste. Pressure wouldn't work. He might simply turn back and blame me for trying to pollute his caste because he was my servant. That'd be suicidal. He is tied to me by the thread of gratitude he has for Father. I can't let that break.*

'You're right, Kenchappa, it was my fault. Do this: keep a plastic bucket and mug in the cowshed. I'll tell my son to use that. We can get him hot water in that bucket for his bath. Because it's plastic, there's no risk of pollution.'

This seemed to comfort Kenchappa. He nodded.

She got back to the study after giving tea to the driver. Handing him his cup, she asked Nazir, 'I'm curious. Didn't you find anybody suitable in Saudi? I mean, surely your colleagues, friends know you're an eligible bachelor. Didn't they do any matchmaking?'

'Oh, but I'm not a Saudi!' he replied instantly.

'But you're a Muslim.'

'But you don't understand! Saudis think they're the best. They don't marry their girls off to non-Saudis and they'll cut the throat of any girl who says she wants to marry a non-Saudi man. And they demand outrageous amounts of dowry from the groom. I've seen how middle-class Saudis who can't afford that kind of dowry get their sons married off to girls from Syria and Egypt. But the worst is reserved for women from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. These poor women generally work as servants. The man of the house forcibly marries her as his third or fourth "wife".'

'But doesn't Islam preach that Muslims everywhere in the world are equal?'

'But people of every country think they're superior to others. And in Saudi, there are several tribes and each tribe thinks it's superior to the other. Some tribes don't marry outside of their tribe.'

'Child, is there any compelling reason for you to work in Saudi?'

'No, not really. But no other country will pay as much for the work I do. Besides, other countries take like a third, or even half my salary as tax. Saudi doesn't have income tax. Even Europeans and Americans come to work in

Saudi if they get a chance.’

10

Professor N.S.N. Sastri had distinguished himself as one of the leading intellectuals of Karnataka quite early in his career before he earned pride of place for himself on the national stage. He was a naturally gifted orator endowed with flawless command over language, an ability to emote and erudition to evaluate any issue on philosophical grounds. He fearlessly proclaimed his revolutionary ideas and gave fiery speeches that motivated young people to join the group of revolutionary thinkers, whose goal was to change the course of history. Professor Sastri was every youth's role model. He could speak for hours with equal ease on the state of the world's economy and on India's five-thousand-year-old cultural history. He condemned societal evils like dowry and untouchability and called for immediate, drastic reforms. This quickly endeared him to the media. Suddenly he was everywhere. He was the star of every seminar. He was the pillar that supported progressive rallies and the esteemed guest of every inaugural function. Professor Sastri came to be regarded as a social reformer of sorts. Professorship came to him at a very young age, followed by national honours such as the Padmasri, Padmabhushan and Padmavibhushan. However, these weren't enough for his students, fans and followers alike.

'You deserve nothing less than the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian honour!'

'Awards get their value from the person—the person doesn't become great because he has bagged awards. Until you understand this timeless truth, you'll remain stuck at the individual level; you'll never be elevated to the philosophical level. Think about it. Tell me the names of all those people who changed the direction of history and were given awards for their efforts.'

This was at a private gathering of a handful of his followers. The followers hung on to every word, which he said in a trance-like state, his eyes surpassing time itself. The papers reported this and his fame and respect increased exponentially.

Another reason contributed to his immense popularity with young men and women. After he completed his MA in India, Professor Sastri travelled to Oxford and returned with his degree and a British wife. A widely circulated rumour held that Professor Sastri's mentor at Oxford gave his daughter in marriage to his brilliant disciple as a gift of sorts. A counter-rumour held that the first one was horribly wrong because the West had no concept of 'giving the daughter in marriage' and that she was the professor's classmate who was drawn to his intellectual prowess. In the end, nobody was sure which rumour was right. If she had graduated with him, it didn't make sense for her to not work. An Oxford degree guaranteed a lecturer's position at the minimum. Something didn't quite tally with this British woman who chose to stay at home and be his wife rather than go out and make a career of her own. Nobody now remembered these wild guessing games, which belonged to an era that dated back to forty years. His wife, initially a mandatory ornament to every function that Professor Sastri graced, gradually withdrew and then completely stopped accompanying him. She'd go to bookshops once in a while and buy a few James Hadley Chase novels. Sunday was church day. After service, she would chat with a few friends. This was pretty much her social life. She was polite with neighbours but the politeness didn't develop into anything. She knew enough Kannada to speak to the servants who worked at her house. She wasn't really in touch with her parents, strict Catholics who had bitterly opposed her marriage to the professor because he had refused to convert. She had flown to England exactly twice in all these years of marriage. Her parents took solace in the fact that she still retained her Catholic faith. They died a few years later. After that, there was nothing left in England for her.

The couple had a son and daughter. Diganth was ten years older than Aruna and resembled his father in skin colour and facial features, while Aruna was fairer and had brown hair. Diganth was academically brilliant and graduated in computer engineering, followed by an MBA from Stanford. He joined an information technology company in the Bay Area and worked there for a few years before returning to India. Back in India, he got a job in a large multinational software company and worked for two years before starting his own firm. It grew quickly and before long, his customer base spread to Germany, the United States and France. Last year, his company posted a record turnover of 96 million. He had ambitious dreams, one of which was to outclass the likes of Wipro and Infosys. He married Babita, a Punjabi who

had been his colleague in the past. Babita looked after administration and staffing while he focussed on sales and marketing. The government had recently approved their proposal to build a massive corporate facility and had sanctioned fifty acres of land for the purpose. The approval was the outcome of Professor Sastri's tactful conversation with a minister to whom he acted as an unofficial campaign adviser. It was rumoured that Diganth had to pay 5 million 'beyond' his father's apparent closeness to the minister. It was also said that the professor had himself 'fixed' the sum. It was not difficult to know who was behind these rumours or what the intent was. It was meant to discredit Professor Sastri's career as a committed Marxist. Nothing would damage his public image more than the fact that he had helped broker a kickback deal between a politician and his own son, a flourishing capitalist. While wink-wink, nudge-nudge deals between businessmen and politicians were common knowledge, it was unthinkable that the arch-proponent of Marxism in India would do something that could destroy everything he had built over a lifetime. And this rumour was spread by former loyalists of the professor who had access to sections of the media. But the professor was made of sterner stuff. His response was characteristic.

'I'm a staunch adherent of democratic values and these values give strength to my words. It's true he's my son but that doesn't mean I have a right to impose my will on him. I look upon such behaviour as a blot on my own character. Indeed, I have, from the very beginning, been at the forefront of opposing such feudal cultural mores. I have lived by example. I've walked out on my parents because they believed in a regressive culture, which they sought to impose on me. I didn't oppose my son marrying a Punjabi girl. On the contrary, I blessed him from the bottom of my heart because his marriage is at one level an example that showcases national unity. Equally, we all know what's happening in our country in the name of chasing the liberalization mirage. The private sector is multiplying at an alarming pace and the consequence is an equally rapid increase in the numbers of workers. As history has shown, the private sector will exploit the workers and sooner or later, workers will unite and overthrow these capitalists and establish an order where the dictatorship of the workers will be a reality. But to reach that stage of history, we must pass through the present stage. This is the essence of Marx's statement that communism first triumphs in industrialized nations. My followers and anybody who has respect for me must actually feel proud of the fact that my son will be but one small stair that leads up to a fully

communist India of the future. And for the record, I don't live with my son and I have nothing to do with his business interests. If I know my son well, he hasn't and he won't pay bribe to anybody and the allegation that I brokered some deal is the product of a very diseased mind. Needless to say, it has wounded me very deeply and I'm left with no option but to take legal recourse against the authors, purveyors and publishers of this disgraceful personal attack.'

However, this statement didn't create the intended panic among the perpetrators of the personal attack. They wrote their own retort, which the newspapers didn't publish. They distributed pamphlets against the professor and wrote in magazines and journals where they commanded some influence but nothing came out of it. The professor knew that they would eventually give up, owing to sheer fatigue. And they did. But an interesting outcome of this sordid affair was that it endeared him to the business class, which had till then avoided him because of his committed communist credentials. They began to invite him to their functions and requested him to deliver inspiring lectures. He spoke about the importance of having an open climate to do business as the best way to ensure faster economic growth but cautioned businessmen against having profit as the only goal. Entrepreneurs, he said, quoting Mahatma Gandhi, were trustees of the society and he urged them to follow the Mahatma's dictum. From this perspective, he said, there was no fundamental difference between Mahatma Gandhi and Karl Marx. His popularity soared. More invitations poured in. He became a regular at diverse corporate functions—parties to celebrate new appointments to the top management, to felicitate a CEO, and company annual days. He introduced heads of powerful business houses to his son and daughter-in-law who were invariably present at these occasions.

Aruna was an average child from the beginning. She took down copious notes in class, memorized her lessons and transferred them back on to her answer paper during exams. Her grades were average throughout school and college, right up to her MA. Despite his enormous influence, her father found it tough to get her a job that would secure her future. If he wished, her brother could take her in his own company but he ran a computer software outfit and she had graduated in the humanities. Then there was Babita, also a partner of the company. She refused to admit any family member in whatever position in the company. In the end, the professor managed to find her a lecturer's job in a rundown college. It didn't pay her a full salary but she had a job. She was

also free to choose her life partner, but she hadn't done that either. A thorough introvert, she had accepted her life as it was. Her age compelled Professor Sastri to do some groom-hunting for her. He spoke to his friends and contacts and followers and generally put the word out, but nothing materialized. For all its cosmopolitan and open atmosphere, Bangalore's society had barely progressed beyond a few superficial steps. The families of prospective grooms noticed some glaring aspects: a British Catholic mother and the complete absence of Indian traditions of celebrating festivals and observances on special occasions. Professor Sastri had promised his classmate at the time of marrying her that he wouldn't interfere with her religious beliefs and he had remained true to his word. He had eschewed religion and, one way or the other, it didn't matter to him. His devout Catholic wife made it a point to take both her children to the church every Sunday. Post high school, Diganth became convinced that children were supposed to follow their father's religion. In his engineering days, he learned that his father was a committed Marxist and had a fair idea of what that meant. His experience in the US led him to conclude that religion was a set of beliefs, practices and traditions that had evolved over countless centuries and these were different for different races. Babita, who had graduated from IIT Delhi, was content to have her religious needs fulfilled by Diwali, bhangra, and some important vrats—observances and fasts. Diganth had agreed to get married like a Punjabi groom. He wore an elaborate sherwani, sat on the horse, led the baraat—the groom's procession—and sat before the sacred wedding ceremonial fire before tying the knot at midnight. The professor, his wife and Aruna attended the wedding and blessed the couple.

Aruna was always her mother's daughter. Her mother showered extra love to this child born ten years after Diganth. She didn't let her child out of her sight for a moment and the girl clung to her. For as long as she could remember, her mother had made Jesus all-pervasive in her life. Aruna uttered his name before beginning the most mundane task. She crossed herself at appropriate occasions. The chain around her neck with a pendant of Christ on the cross was a part of her body. She prayed with full faith to Jesus to save her from sin. As far as she could recall in these twenty-eight years, she had never missed her Sunday service. In high school, all her classmates wore a bindi on their forehead. One day, she borrowed a bindi from one of the girls and wore it. She never forgot the look her mother gave her when she returned home. And her tone when she said: 'Darling, do you really need to wear this

pagan symbol? If you like wearing something on your forehead, wear the symbol of the cross.' Aruna decided to try that out but no shop sold a cross-shaped bindi. Even if she managed to get it made, she would look ridiculous wearing it. Females either wore the traditional bindi or they sported a plain forehead. She decided to leave her forehead unadorned. This incident sowed the first seed of confusion in her mind.

Her name was Aruna Sastri but she was almost European in her appearance. She was a Catholic Christian. Something didn't match and she didn't know where to look for answers. It tormented her throughout her college days. Every year schools, colleges and factories declared a holiday to celebrate major festivals like Gowri and Ganesh. The Ganesh festival was especially grand. The whole city became a celebration in itself. Every house elaborately worshipped Lord Ganesh with flowers, fruits, sweets and delicacies, and there was a kind of zest that Aruna craved but didn't get in her own home. Their home seemed empty and soulless. Her father was often invited for puja lunches by his friends but he never asked her mother to celebrate it in their own home. She knew her mother wouldn't agree to do it even if he asked her. That reminded her of the day she had been invited to Dakshyini's house for the evening arati. She didn't tell her mother where she was going. When she arrived there, the story of Ganesh and his mother Gowri was being narrated. Nothing had prepared her for what she saw in the living room. The large pedestal at the centre of the living room was decorated on each side with tall plantain shoots and bunches of shining green mango leaves, multi-hued flowers and pomegranates, guavas, apples and sugar apples. An idol of Mother Goddess Gowri sat on the upper step of the pedestal and Ganesh on the lower step. The whole sight, especially, the picture of the intricately-decked mother-son duo caught her with a sense of profundity she hadn't experienced before. Her attention turned to the story the priest was reciting: 'Gowri has come to her mother's home for her convalescence after giving birth to Ganesh. She has to stay here for five days during which time both she and her baby will be worshipped. An elaborate feast will be prepared every day in their honour. On the sixth day, the mother will return to her husband's home with her son after a very emotional farewell.'

The story struck a deep chord in Aruna. It was as if Gowri and Ganesh were her family. Aruna was taken to a separate room after the arati and fed with special sweet dishes, which were first offered to Gowri and Ganesh

during the puja earlier in the day. She was suddenly angry. Why didn't her mother do all this? Nothing of this sort was ever cooked at home…that brought memories of another occasion. In Padmalatha's house she had been invited to celebrate Krishna Janmasthami. It was supposed to be a festival that celebrated Lord Krishna's birthday every year. The sight of the baby Krishna dressed in tiny clothes sleeping in the festooned cradle endeared him to her instantly. The decoration was simple. Almost plain. But you could *touch* the love that emanated from this cosy atmosphere. It was as if the baby Krishna in the cradle was a real child of the house, upon whom they had poured all their love and shared it with their friends, relatives and neighbours by inviting them to the elaborate feast they had prepared on the occasion. She knew a little about Krishna. He was the crafty strategist who had helped the Pandavas win the great Mahabharata war. Hindus worshipped him as an avatar of God. That was one face of Krishna. The other face was what the padre at the church had told her about—he was a liar, a thief and a philanderer and a religion that worshipped such a person as God was…what kind of religion was it really…and what kind of people were these Hindus who worshipped such a god? This somehow didn't tally with her experience. Padmalatha was a very nice girl. Her father was a renowned surgeon in the government hospital. He apparently didn't take any bribes and returned home late every night after completing his duties at the hospital. He didn't have a private practice on the side, something that'd fetch him at least `10 lakh every month, given his skill and experience. He was an FRCS and had practised in the United States for five years. He treated poor patients for free—an ideal he had followed throughout his life. He had earned the trust and respect of people around him. They stood up when he was around and saluted him—this man worshipped Krishna as God. Aruna decided that Hindus worshipped strange, weird gods. Besides, they had female gods…how could a female god exist? She wasn't alone in this; her mother shared this question—God *was* male. And the padre was…well, he'd launch into a sermon about how Hindus indulged in shocking sacrilege by treating God like he was their child.

In the end, none of this helped clear her confusion. And there was no way she could pose her confusion to her mother. She knew what awaited her: 'Why are you having these questions, dear? Looks like your faith in Jesus has weakened. You know what that means don't you? You will fall into eternal hell so ghastly that no words can describe it.' And her intense blue eyes would show a glimpse of that hell.

She wanted to ask her father. She knew he was regarded as an authority of sorts on these matters. She couldn't recall a day when he hadn't returned home without a garland or sweets or fruit or shawl. The papers and TV would unfailingly report his speeches. She was sure he had the answer but her mother had forbidden that very long ago: 'Keep your Marxism outside this house. I don't need you to break my or my daughter's faith.' His response to that: 'Sure, darling. Whatever you say. May Jesus bless you both.' That reaffirmed what she had always suspected—Dad was scared of Mum. Besides, he was pretty much aloof around the house. He had never spoken to her with any tinge of intimacy. His warmth was practised. And his life outside home was just too busy for him to meet his own daughter.

There was another reason why her father feared her mother. She was well aware of his habit of indulging in unnecessary physical demonstrations of affection with his female students and fans and she was vocal about her displeasure. Aruna remembered a particularly ugly fight that had erupted when she was still quite young. Her mother's ferocity and the general unpleasantness of the situation had made her retreat to her room in mild fear and embarrassment. In response to her mother's verbal whiplash, her father had attempted a courageous but weak, 'Why do make such a fuss of all this? Don't be such a prude! You are from England! It isn't like you've been embarrassed by a hug or a peck between friends.'

'But *this* is India. And even out there nobody tolerates *your* kind of behaviour—out there no man hugs and puts his arms around a lady's shoulder or unnecessarily touches others, especially women! I know what exactly you are up to with all that…touching…nauseating!'

'Woman! Thy name is suspicion!' he had managed to say with a broad smile and hug her.

On another occasion—it was a Sunday—she overheard her mother telling the Anglo-Indian lady, Mrs Robson, 'If this was England, I'd have left this man many years ago. I'm Catholic, so there's no question of divorce. And now I'm fully cut off from England. I guess I'll have to suffer here.'

Aruna finally decided to put her confusion to rest by simply accepting what her mother prescribed to her in the matter of God, faith and religion. If her curiosity was strong enough, there were hundreds of places where she could find an answer—it just didn't occur to her to look up books, to talk to her teachers or to visit a place like the Ramakrishna Mission.

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One day at 10.00 a.m. as Lakshmi stood waiting for an auto rickshaw outside Hotel Sharif Mahal in Shivajinagar, a car that passed by braked to a sudden halt a few metres from where she was standing, paused and then slowly backed up before stopping in front of her. The left front window rolled down and she heard the voice before she saw the face. Professor Sastri was in the driver's seat.

'Lakshmi? Look at you! I could barely recognize you. But how can't I recognize my girl? Come on in. What're you doing here outside…' he looked out and then up, 'Hotel Sharif?' He raised the window once she got in and sat beside him. His car exuded luxury. The glasses were tinted.

'I heard you're anchored in the village. What do you do other than reading throughout the day? Why did you leave Bangalore?'

'Can you drop me to the bus stand? I need to go to Kunigal.'

'I *know*. I'll drop you. But you can't go just like that. We've met after four years! Let's go somewhere first. There's so much to talk and catch up on. This damn city has no place for people to spend time in private. Should we go to Cubbon Park?'

She nodded.

'Good girl!' he exclaimed and showed his pleasure by placing his left hand on her shoulder.

'It's unsafe to drive with one hand, sir, you know Bangalore traffic…' Her tone didn't mask her annoyance.

'Ah! Tell me you're scared of this headline: "Renowned artist Razia found dead with Professor Sastri in a car accident!"' he chuckled and squeezed her shoulder, casting a glance sideways at her. She didn't know what to say.

'But look at you, my dear. You haven't dyed your hair; your face tells me it hasn't seen any kind of care for ages. I know you're staying in our village, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't groom yourself. Why don't you at least use some cream? Nobody should lose the love of enjoying life. Look at me.'

She had already seen him when she climbed into the car. He was the same. He had consciously cultivated the wise, middle-aged intellectual look. His hair was dyed fully black, barring a few wisps of grey side-locks that ended just above his ear. Sprinkles of grey-white hair strategically dotted his black socialist beard. Years of experience in theatre and films told her that he

regularly made some beauty salon very rich. She suddenly felt pity for him.

'What're your children doing, sir? I know your son has his own computer company. I think he's married? Any grandchildren? What does your daughter do?'

Why was she asking these questions? Was that her way of hinting at his own age? Ah! But he wasn't really *that* old. Besides, he didn't really care. He mustered confidence and said in a tone that didn't reveal his discomfort, 'My son and his wife are busy building their company. They do almost nothing else. My grandson is four. My daughter-in-law doesn't want a second child. She says it's tough to raise a child properly amid work pressures. God knows if more women thought like her, there might come a day when the human race will disappear from this earth…' Lakshmi cut him off abruptly with, 'That means you want another grandchild!'

'No no no! I'm not talking about myself—you know I never think about myself. Most of us think about ourselves but I've always believed that your thoughts hold value when they dwell upon universal truths.' She noticed his eyes were now—even while driving—gleaming with the same prophetic tint she had observed on numerous occasions in the past. Both his hands were now on the steering.

'What about your daughter?'

'Frankly, I'm worried about her. She's a lecturer. I've told her repeatedly that she's free to select a husband for herself. It's been four years. She's still single. I think most people in this country aren't capable of selecting their own life partners. Our society has a long struggle to change for the better. The boys these days are still stuck to traditional ways. I tried my hand at matchmaking but you know the problem…' he let the words trail off as they reached the park.

He sat next to her on a bench in the park. 'Do you remember how there was a huge conspiracy by politicians to destroy this beautiful place? I launched the Save Cubbon Park movement…remember the overwhelming response to it? I finally managed to save it. Else we wouldn't be sitting here now. You know, the government hates my guts but it's also scared of me.'

His words didn't register. She was already distracted in some thought.

'…I love spending time in such places. It's amazing how your mind gets inspired! I guess that's why they say parks are the inner minds of city dwellers… Hello! What're you thinking?'

'How old is your daughter? Name?'

‘I’m hurt now. You’ve forgotten. Aruna. Twenty-eight.’

‘I’m sorry, sir. Now I remember. She’s very fair, like a European. Right?’

‘She resembles her maternal grandmother. I’ve seen the woman. She was extremely pretty. Why? Do you know any match?’

‘I’m looking for a match for my son. He’s thirty-two. He has an MS in petrochemical engineering from Texas University. He works in Saudi now and earns a huge salary. He’s spending his vacation here now. I’m not in touch with Amir. I guess you know he’s married again. This is also hurting my son’s marriage prospects.’

‘Oh? So it’s true. I’m sorry. I heard the news but I didn’t know it was true. If I’d known this before, I wouldn’t have spared him! But why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I got to know of it quite late. Anyway, let’s not talk about it now. I just want Nazir to get married as soon as possible.’

‘I bet he’s a handsome young man. He’s *your* son.’

She extracted a photo from her purse and handed it to the Professor. He instantly raised his eyebrows high, opened his eyes wide and exclaimed with pleasure, ‘He looks like a thoroughbred socialist intellectual!’

‘No. That’s an Islamic beard. Pure Saudi.’

‘But you know there’s no fundamental difference between Islam and socialism. Both are founded on the same principle of share what you eat.’

And you’re parroting jaded old lies. The fundamental trait of an Islamic society is the marked difference between the master and the slave. You quote the Vedic ‘Ishavasyamidam sarvam yat kincha jagatyaam jagat; tena tyaktena bhunjeetha maa grudhah kasya sviddhanam’ *(All that exists in this changing universe exists for the habituation of the Lord. Protect thyself therefore by renunciation. Lust not after any man’s wealth) in your speeches by putting this verse in unbelievable contexts*. The last thing she wanted was a debate with this professor. So she said nothing.

He continued, his brows still raised, ‘But why are you wearing this old sari? You said he makes a lot of money.’

‘I have enough money to buy dozens of new saris on my own. I’m just not interested.’

‘Good! You’re right. Never take money from your children. That’s my principle, too. What about Amir?’

‘I don’t know but knowing him, I don’t think he takes money from his son. He hasn’t told me directly but I know Nazir is staying at Hotel Sharif

Mahal because he's embarrassed to stay in the same house as his stepmother, who is younger to him.' Suddenly she realized why he had asked this specific question. He was trying to find out if the responsibility of caring for his parents in their old age would fall upon Nazir. That responsibility would also include spending money.

'I'm very liberal: you know I don't believe in religion…my life is a living instance of my convictions. Forty years ago, I married a foreigner, a Christian. Aruna is free to marry anybody. The boy's religion is the least of my concerns, but I think it's good if she marries an Indian. At the least, they'll have a shared sense of culture and tradition. Elizabeth insists on getting her married to a Catholic but I know she'll say yes if…other factors are favourable. Let them see each other first.'

The prospective bride and groom met each other at the professor's home. And agreed to marry each other. Aruna said she expected nothing and surprisingly agreed to Nazir's conditions: to convert to Islam before the wedding, marry according to Islamic wedding rituals and post-marriage, to live like a pure Muslim wife. Her mother, however, objected to this.

'Have you forgotten,' she asked indignantly, 'forsaking Jesus means eternal damnation in burning hell?'

'I'm forsaking one prophet for another. If that prophet comes after me to inflict punishment, this prophet will protect me. Besides, the Last Prophet Mohammad (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) is far mightier than your Jesus. How many battles he has won, how many lands conquered and look how far he has spread Islam in the world! What strength does your Jesus have, a prophet who asked his followers to show the other cheek? He has the strength to neither attack on his own nor defend himself against those who attack him!' replied Aruna in a tone her mother had never imagined she would hear from her daughter.

'I have no objection. Let her convert to Islam. But you must have a civil marriage,' said the professor.

'Uncle, if the Saudis find out that I've married a non-Muslim, I'll stand to lose my job the next time there's a lay-off in my company. I know the procedure. She needs to become a Muslim first and then we need to get married in the presence of a Maulvi and get a marriage certificate. This certificate will be the basis for her passport. Her details will show that she has a Muslim name, and that she's a proper Muslim wife of a Muslim man. Else, she won't get her visa. But uncle, you tell me, what's the use of a civil

marriage? I mean, why do we even need it?'

Professor Sastri replied in a cheerful tone dripping with intimacy, his body language also conveying that intimacy, 'Let me tell you something frankly, my boy. I helped your mother and father marry each other. I encouraged your mother to convert to Islam. And now, your father has married again when your mother is still his wife. A civil marriage would have prevented this. I'm sure all our intentions are honourable but one cannot predict the future. The human mind is fickle. It can turn any way. As her father, I must be extra cautious. You agree, right?'

'I don't know what the matter between my parents is. I love my mother a lot. But uncle, don't you see that my father hasn't pronounced talaq on her? Isn't that great? Besides, it is rude to comment on the relationship of one's own parents. You agree, right, uncle?' Nazir said in a tone that almost mimicked the professor's.

'Can't you get a job in any other country?'

'That's not the point, uncle. I'm in love with Salma. And I'll continue to love her with the same intensity as long as I'm alive. Trust me. You're a man and I know you're able to understand my feelings. Oh! Salma is your daughter's name. She has agreed to change her name to Salma.' He rose and put his hand warmly on the professor's shoulder. That gesture told the future father-in-law that the argument was over.

Professor Sastri spoke to his daughter after he left.

'But you *must* have a civil marriage. You can have your nikah later. That'll be an effective legal barrier if he decides to marry again.'

'Daddy, mutual trust is the basis of every marriage. How is a marriage even possible without mutual trust? If I doubt him now, he might call off the wedding.'

'Let him. I'll find another groom for you.'

'Daddy, please don't worry. I fully trust Nazir. And please don't say anything that'll hurt his feelings. Besides, tradition says that the wife has to change over to the husband's religion.' she said, decisively.

The professor was stunned. Barely a week and she was so deeply attached to Nazir! Was this the real meaning of romantic love? His mind recollected his feelings for Elizabeth during those heady initial days. Not very different. But he had failed to detect how grossly incompatible they were as a couple. But his daughter's behaviour was puzzling. In an age when educated women across the world were critical of the unilateral authority of the Muslim male,

Aruna, his daughter, was willingly putting her neck on the block. She wasn't too bright but she wasn't a total idiot. She had done her fair share of reading and she wasn't unaware of these things. Then it dawned on him. She was sexually repressed. She was twenty-eight. Which meant the repression had a history of at least ten to twelve years. Plus she had been strictly groomed by her Catholic mother. And this was India, unlike the West, where social sanction existed for young people to have sex after they turned sixteen. Children were taught about contraceptives and the need to practise safe sex. Small wonder that she instantly fell for the tall, virile Nazir and blindly accepted all of his conditions. What did she say? Ah! *Tradition says that the wife has to change over to the husband's religion.* He was pretty sure her own female friends held that it was unacceptable for a woman to sacrifice her individuality at the altar of marriage. Hell! I've earned countless female fans after I thundered such stuff in seminars. A woman is not completely free until she discards silly taboos about her body. Why did my own daughter turn out like this?

But the professor was dogged. He asked Lakshmi to try and convince Nazir. She thought it made sense and spoke to him.

'Ammajaan, marriage is bound by Shariah. If I have a civil marriage before my nikah, it means my nikah is just for namesake.'

'No. It simply means the two marriages complement each other.'

'Please! You can't convince me with your noble-sounding reasoning. Shariah provides total justice to both the man and the woman. If the man decides to leave the woman right at the moment of the wedding, he has to pay a penalty for doing so. If he pronounces talaq, he has to pay a previously agreed upon sum to the wife and she has to take that and leave. Marriage is a contract, right?'

'And what if you marry another woman—or women—like what your father's done?'

'The Shariah provides for even that. It asks the man to treat all his wives equally. But nothing can shake my faith in Islam—it's deep, true and genuine and it's not an outward show.'

She knew that was the end of the matter. And she cursed herself for a moment. His ideal match should've come from a family that shared his rigidity and irrational orthodoxy, but she wanted him to marry an educated girl. Aruna had blindly agreed to all his conditions but did she really understand the complete ramifications? She wasn't sure if the professor had

explained these ramifications to her. She didn't feel good about this. Aruna wasn't her daughter but it was unfair to hurt any daughter. She called the professor and reported her conversation with Nazir.

'Sir, I don't mean to spoil my own son's chances of marrying Aruna, but this is serious. Let this matter remain between us. I need you to explain the complete repercussions of marrying an orthodox Muslim man. I need you to convince her to agree to a civil marriage…'

He cut her off mid-sentence with, 'If I'd already done that, I would have called you.'

'But why does she insist on marrying him?'

'I can't say that on the phone. I'll tell you when we meet.'

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It was two months since Aruna—now Salma—had married and flown to Saudi but the professor never stopped worrying. He regretted that he was unable to give her a good upbringing. Worse, he was unsure if her marriage was safe. And he blamed her mother for giving her a narrow-minded Catholic upbringing that closed all avenues of free intellectual exploration. Her mother was angry for a different reason. She hated the fact that Aruna had converted into a faith that was the enemy of Christianity from historic times. And she was doubly angry because Aruna's marriage happened with the full support of the father. The professor and his wife stopped talking to each other and this silent marital war continued without disturbance. There was no need for either of them to suffer the humiliation of breaking the silence first.

The professor suddenly began to miss his mother intensely. There was no logical reason, but she occupied his mind more often after Aruna left. He recalled the words of a poet who wrote that the mother is reborn as the granddaughter. *Mother is eighty-five. I was born when she was fifteen. Oh well, it was like that in those days…I was the only son…the only son who survived apart from three other daughters. Just four survived out of who knows how many other children she bore. And how your world changes once you step out of your limited circle of parents and sisters!* Even Elizabeth. She could've been a little accommodating. 'I'm not asking you to leave your religion. Wear a sari. Put a bindi. Wear bangles. It'll be easier for my parents to accept you.' She refused. 'You've given your word. Don't try to hoist your pagan practices on me.' She discussed with the padre at the Bangalore

Catholic Church. He confirmed her views. ‘No. No. Don’t entertain any unchristian practices.’

He didn’t take her to Narasapura ever. She’d never met his parents. He’d visit once every two or three years and take some money with him. ‘No thank you. Lord Narasimha has given us enough, son.’ He’d ask his mother what jewellery she wanted. ‘Why would I need jewellery at this age, son? You keep that money. You’ll need it for your family.’ He felt bad but it somehow made sense. He wasn’t earning too well then. His career was just taking off and then he needed a fair bit to maintain the house according to British standards.

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But for the beef-eating episode, they wouldn’t have cut off ties with me completely. I was making waves as a Progressive in those days. I wrote a highly charged article in the monthly The Critic *about how the rishis, the sages of Vedic India, used to freely eat beef. Orthodox Hindus raised such a massive stink! They organized rallies and got farmers from the villages to join their protests. They threw stones at my house and trailed me everywhere shouting ‘Down down Sastri!’ God knows, the bloody retrogrades would’ve torched my house and probably maimed me. The government of the day offered tight police protection and assured their complete support to me. Even otherwise, nothing would’ve stopped me. I wrote in the very next issue, ‘The seekers of a ban on beef-eating are keeping the beef-eaters out of mainstream society, a dangerous form of separatism, which if left unchecked, will culminate in yet another Partition. Look at the world: which other country has banned beef-eating? I ate it when I was abroad and I eat it even now whenever I have the opportunity to. Does that mean I’m not an Indian? Does my identity as an Indian rest on my beef-eating credentials? In a democratic country, nobody has the right to impinge on my right to eat the food of my choice…’ This piece didn’t arouse the earlier fury. I guess the orthodox anger had subsided. The government’s protection assured, we continued organizing seminars and workshops without fear.*

I think it was the next year that I went to Kalenahalli. Prakash Gowda had invited me to his daughter’s wedding. I couldn’t refuse the invitation because he was the local socialist leader. This was a great opportunity for me to expand my reach inside the party and so I went. Narasapura was right

next door. I couldn't have risked not paying a visit. If I didn't go, the bloody rustic gossipers would use that to spread more lies about me. It was almost 3 p.m. when I reached home. Mother was in the portico making cotton wicks for the oil lamps that she placed before her idols. She didn't recognize me. Which was understandable. I was dressed in the 'Jayaprakash Narayan' style. 'Mother it's me, Nanu.' Her face brightened. She began to get up when I saw Father walking towards her. I didn't see him emerge from the house.

'You're coming here from Prakash Gowda's daughter's wedding? Wait.' He stormed into the house, returned with a copy of The Critic*, held it before my face and said, 'You've openly, and boldly admitted that you eat beef. Is that true?' This lightning-like interrogation stumped me. I recovered quickly and said, 'Father, I work in the political circles. I need to say, I need to write things at times, things that I don't believe in. Do you believe all that? Come on!'*

'If what you've written is untrue, why do you write such lies? How many tongues do you speak with? I'm your father, and she's given birth to you. Look at us and tell the truth!'

That wounded my self-respect. I retorted, not concealing the anger I felt, 'I come here all the way to see you and I get this kind of treatment! Even if I did eat beef, what's wrong? Every country—apart from China and Mongolia, which don't rear cattle—every race, in fact everybody in the world eats beef. Even here…do you have any idea just how many people eat beef? You can't regulate people's diets. That's not healthy for democracy. That's…that's… that's fascism!'

'I'm glad you admitted the truth. Your mother and I will go atone for the sin of being responsible for your birth.' And he went in. I sat in my car, started it and left the place.

Prakash Gowda told me some days later that Narasimhe Gowda had given my article to father. So this was that old Gandhian's way of avenging my act of supporting his daughter marrying a Muslim. Ha! Even Gandhi was a cow-worshipper. Their loss! The Progressive Movement knows no bonds. The deluge of the movement drowns friendships, relationships, people, siblings, parents—it lashes them to who knows which shores. The life of every committed Progressive shows how he was alone throughout life, separated from ignorant parents and brothers and sisters. This is my path as well.

This gave Professor Sastri solace for twenty-five years. But now, the thought of Aruna in Saudi minus the safety of a civil marriage…his mother's

image began to torment his thoughts. There was no way the two were related but Mother…It was illogical and insane. But his mind refused to think of anything else. His parents had showered all their love on his three sisters, their husbands and grandchildren. *Mother is eighty-five. Father is ninety-five. He might touch a century. Or cross* it. *Or…who knows? They won't let me do the last rites. And I was cut off from all their family functions. It wasn't their fault. What kind of a religion is it that lets them dismember ties with their own son because he ate cow meat? What kind of a religion is it that despite my taunts, criticism, rallies and speeches it continues to thrive without as much as a whimper?*

11

The professor put the letter down. The message was from the US. It was an invitation to a series of discussions about the trends in intellectual discourse in academia in different countries. They had written to him, enquiring about his availability. A month-long stay. He had to deliver a biweekly talk on 'The Intellectual Climate of India'. Northwestern University had indicated that it would deeply appreciate his 'soonest possible arrival' there. It didn't take long for him to spot Tom's hand behind this invitation. Tom was a deeply-committed academic-intellectual tirelessly working to spread Leftist ideology in the US university circles. The professor decided that this would be a good trip to make. It would engage his mind constructively. And then there was the prospect of dollars. He could buy a new car with that. But there was a problem. He had already agreed to become a senior resource person at a major but boring workshop in Varanasi. These workshops were different in all but name. The same crowd of enthusiastic young men and women. The same questions. But he couldn't back out. He'd given his word. If he cancelled it, he'd upset a lot of people. Negative publicity. He decided to finish this workshop and then head to the US. He looked at his calendar. *Ah! I'll call a small press meet and tell the world I've been invited by the Northwestern University. No. Wait. I need to talk to Diganth first. Ask him how he's doing. Make some small talk about his company. Must be in touch. Smart boy, I know he's doing well.*

Suddenly he felt a surge of pride. He had used his influence to further his son's business but he hadn't taken a single rupee from him. *That's the way it should be. Never take from your children. I know Elizabeth takes money from him but…oh well, women fall short in the self-respect department. But I can't say this in public. The feminists will fall on me. Am I too hard on Elizabeth? If she had a job, I suppose she wouldn't be asking Diganth. And if she did, she'd have divorced me long ago. No no no. She was Catholic…damn! Where's that calendar?*

He saw shadows before him and looked straight ahead. The two who stood before him were about thirty years old and were dressed like Progressive intellectuals. Unkempt hair, baggy shirts and jeans. They didn't waste time with introductions. They were planning an ambitious seminar across Karnataka on Progressive ideas and they wanted Professor Sastri to inaugurate it. He knew them. There was no chance he wouldn't know anybody who called himself a Progressive and there was no chance that any Progressive worth his label wouldn't come to the professor at least once in his life to seek his blessings. The professor patiently listened to them and gave a mini-sermon about the power of Progressive ideas. 'Look where Europe was before it grew into a gigantic tree on the fertile roots of ideas, which powered its conquest of the world. Rationalism! Rationalism itself is power, and lack of rationalism is weakness. So yes, you're on the right path with this seminar.' The two young men were lost in the sweep of his magical words. They offered him a cigarette, lit it for him and before they could light theirs, the phone rang. 'Ah! What do we do with this? An instrument of convenience becomes a concentration-destroyer! Excuse me…'

'Sir, this is Lakshmi. I'm calling from Kunigal. I've bad news for you. Your mother has expired…'

'What! Haa! Whe…what happened?' The colour drained from his face.

'She was unwell for a long time. You know the kind of medical care that we have in the village. Your sister Vishalakshamma took her to Tumkur for treatment. Your father was there in Tumkur for a month. Doctors said heart trouble but they said treatment was pretty much useless at her age. And now…'

The professor said nothing.

'And so there was the question of her cremation and other ceremonies done as part of her last rites. Your father said the son-in-law is equivalent to a son and appointed his eldest son-in-law to carry out the rites. He did the cremation. And now they've decided to have the rest of the rites in the village. Meenakshi and Jalajakshi are already there. Their husbands and children will join them on the seventh day. Vishalakshamma came home today and asked me to call you. "I don't want people blaming me tomorrow. You tell him. After all, he's the son and he has the first right over all the funeral rites." I came to Kunigal to make this phone call.'

'I'll start right away after I hang up. Can you wait till I come?' he said without thinking.

‘Yes sir. I’ll disconnect now.’

‘Hm.’

The professor’s urgent anxiety was apparent when he said, ‘I’m sorry. My mother has passed away. I must go to my village immediately. It’s six miles beyond Kunigal.’ The two men stood up instantly. ‘We’re really sorry to hear that, sir. Please come with us. We’ll take you there in our car. We insist, sir.’ The professor said okay and sat in the backseat.

Nobody spoke for a long time. When the car turned left after Nelamangala, one of them said, ‘Don’t mind us asking, sir, but how old was your mother? We’re sure she must’ve been a great woman to give birth to a genius like you.’ The professor didn’t say anything for several minutes. Then he launched into a detailed exposition of his mother’s qualities and concluded with, ‘Shankaracharya was the sanyasi, mendicant par excellence. Imagine, in his time he boldly defied tradition and did what no other sanyasi in his time did—he performed his mother’s funeral rites and showed a mother’s greatness to the whole world. Think what that means. He was one of the first humanists, which means he was the first of the Progressives.’

They stopped at Lakshmi’s house first.

‘You come with us. I need to talk to Father and Vishalakshi.’

‘It’s your family matter. How can I possibly come?’

‘You’re one of us. Please just come,’ he insisted.

She thought about this. The professor was probably very embarrassed to face his father after so many years and especially after how they had parted. The professor’s companions struck up a conversation with her, ‘Ma’am, you don’t know who we are, but we know you quite well. The whole country knows you!’

Subbanna, Vishalakshi’s husband, was sitting on the portico when they reached. He was tonsured and the professor didn’t recognize him. He had last seen him a quarter century ago. Subbanna greeted him, ‘When did you come? Let’s go in. Father’s sitting on the bed.’ They went in. The two youths followed them. They saw Shesha Sastri sitting erect on the bare wooden cot with his back to the wall like Time itself waiting for the century to pass. He was bald and his forehead looked like it jutted out. White stubble had grown unevenly over his chin. He wore a short dhoti around his waist and hung a small cloth over his shoulder, together with his sacred thread. The professor prostrated at his feet from a distance and stood up. Subbanna walked around to Shesha Sastri and spoke into his ear. ‘Nanu has come.’

‘Oh!’

Nobody moved for a long time. The near-centenarian then said, ‘All well?’

The professor murmured, ‘Yes.’

And that was it. They could almost see the wall of silence Shesha Sastri had erected. Nobody could think of anything to say. And then after what felt like hours, Vishalakshi emerged from inside, followed by Jalajakshi and Meenakshi.

‘Did you come now, Brother? How’s sister-in-law? How are the children?’ Jalajakshi walked up to him and asked him warmly. He noticed that her hair was coarse like jute and was white. Then he looked across to his two other sisters. Their hair had similar texture and colour.

Shesha Sastri asked the professor to sit down. He sat at the other end, almost perched on the edge of his father’s bed. Lakshmi and the young intellectual duo sat on a straw mat at the other corner of the living room. Subbanna sat in the middle, resting his back against a pillar. The professor felt compelled to speak.

‘If I’d known about mother’s heart trouble, I’d have brought her to Bangalore. I know many highly-skilled, foreign-trained heart surgeons. I could’ve done something.’

‘The Tumkur doctor said it was pointless to do surgery,’ Vishalakshi replied. The room was silent again. Then Vishalakshi turned to her father and said loudly, ‘We three sisters discussed between us and called Brother. A son doing the last rites is not the same as sons-in-law doing them, whatever their devotion and commitment. The scriptures say that if the son is alive, he must perform the rites. Am I correct, Father?’

He didn’t reply for a minute. Then, ‘It doesn’t matter to the dead person’s spirit who does the rites. What state the spirit reaches next depends on the virtues or sins it has accumulated here, on the earth. What does a person who has no son do? What does someone who has no children do? These rites simply help the spirit cross over from one state to the next. The person who performs these rites isn’t doing a favour. He merely performs his duty.’

‘But he’s your son and he’s here, and all of us *want* him to do the rites,’ Meenakshi said.

‘His wish. But he needs to atone first.’

Subbanna got up and walked to Shesha Sastri and said, ‘Well. We anyway chant a mantra before any ritual to atone for sins committed with and

without our knowledge…'

'This isn't as simple as that. It isn't as if he did it unknowingly. He has defied dharma and proclaimed to the whole world that he ate cow meat, that he continues to eat cow meat, and that he'll continue to eat cow meat. He's written it. He's announced it on stage. And he's admitted it before us. No, it's not a sin—it's a *crime*, that's what it is. You know how she was attached to her son but she broke all ties with him through sheer willpower. His atonement isn't as simple as chanting a mantra.'

Subbanna didn't know what to say. Nobody knew what to say. And Shesha Sastri didn't say what the professor had to do. Neither did the professor ask what he had to do. *Father has been nursing this grudge like a snake that waits in its hole patiently for years to take its revenge. Damn! Now I can't ask him. These bloody socialists are here. I should've taken my car. Or asked Diganth to send his driver.* He felt the eyes of the two young men on his back. *I won't look at them.*

Subbanna spoke again. 'Please tell him what he needs to do to atone.'

Shesha Sastri replied instantly. 'Why are *you* asking this? Ask him if this has occurred to him.'

'It's okay, Father. We're asking you on his behalf,' said Meenakshi who was aware of her father's keenness in analyzing the subtleties of dharma.

The old man closed his eyes for a long time trying to recollect something. Then, 'I'm old. It's likely I've forgotten the nuances so it's best you cross-check once with Virupaksha Sastri…' He paused, closed his eyes again, and opened them before continuing, 'A sin, a crime has two forms of punishment. The first is what is given by an assembly…like…like a court. That is the external punishment. The second is the inner punishment—where the sinner punishes himself with full awareness of the sin he has committed. This is called atonement and it's done for self-purification. In ancient times, both forms were done together. In many cases, the assembly wouldn't take note of certain kinds of sins but the sinner would voluntarily atone for even such sins. Atonement is two kinds: the first involves the sinner realizing—body, mind and soul—that what he did was wrong and the second involves him taking a vow to never commit it again and then punishing himself. Wrongdoings too, are classified into two types: those done in public and those done in secret. Atonement for crimes committed in secret can be performed secretly. It isn't mandatory to tell someone. Atonement for sins done in public should be publicly performed. In other words, the world

should know why he is atoning. However, atonement doesn't erase the consequences of the crime. The only purpose of repentance is the purification of the mind. The world recognizes in a way, that the sinner is genuinely repentant. Ah! That's not all. A sin is classified into two forms from another perspective: wilful and non-wilful. Wilful is where the person knowingly inflicts an evil act. Such wrongdoings attract the severest punishment. This man's crime is wilful. By eating beef, he has also become a partner to the crime of killing a cow. There's no way you can eat cow-meat without killing it—either with your own hands or by getting it killed by someone. Anyway, the point is, he has committed a wilful crime and he has celebrated his crime by announcing it to the world through his writing and speeches. The atonement then must be equally harsh and equally public. Ask him if he's ready to swear honestly that he repents what he did. Ask him if he's willing to take an oath that he won't do it ever again. In ancient times, a sin of this severity meant that the sinner had to go stay in the forest for twelve years—they had to fast periodically and eat whatever the forest offered them and face the danger of wild animals. The chances of them returning alive were slim. Our sages who made these laws realized later that this was pretty harsh and reduced the harshness of punishment. You see, as time passes, the severity of punishment decreases. This applies to self-punishment, too. So let him first admit to himself that he committed a crime. Let him write in those same papers and announce on stage that he's atoning for the crime of eating cow meat. If his pride prevents him from doing all this, then it's not repentance because repentance is a penance, the goal of which is to burn pride. Let him spend a few days in Lord Narasimha's temple on a diet of just fruits and pray to the lord for forgiveness. After this, the priest will perform a ritual. That'll complete his atonement. Speak to Virupaksha Sastri and tell him I told you all this and then do as he instructs.'

Shesha Sastri turned his gaze to the thatched roof. Nobody said anything. Vishalakshi opened her mouth to say something to her brother but stopped herself. It was clear that the responsibility to speak was on the professor. The professor said nothing. *Father is quite a man even at this age. The same iron-like decisiveness. Damn! I should've come in my car. Or asked for Diganth's driver. Damn! Damn! I can't even argue with him in this situation. But what a man! How can he retain this force in his argument even now, even in a situation like this when his wife has died barely a few hours ago? And why have I lost my force of argument when my mother is dead for equally the*

same period? He suddenly felt empty inside. Defeat. *Father didn't address me directly. He didn't blame me. He said what his scriptures told him. He hasn't asked me to tell my decision even…like it didn't matter if I agreed to perform the atonement ritual. He's left everything entirely up to me. Ha! Besides, Meenakshi asked him that question—should I shave my head and do the rest of the ceremonies? I think it's best to ask them for a day's time to think. There's enough time anyway. The ceremonies begin on the seventh day.*

He stood up abruptly. 'I was in the middle of something extremely urgent. I rushed here when I heard the unfortunate news from Lakshmi.' He looked at everybody once, bent forward, prostrated before his father and left the house without looking back. His two followers followed him to the car. 'Eat something…at least have some coffee…' His sisters and their husbands milled around the car and fussed over him.'Eat…yes…I'll have lunch.' He got in and closed the door. The car was off.

The driver initiated conversation when the car left the village and turned to the Kunigal main road. 'Please don't mind me saying this, sir. We understand your situation. I think I've read your piece on beef-eating in your *Collected Works*. It's pretty old but personally, it's one of your best pieces…I know it's still going into reprint. Progressive organizations, Muslim League, Indian Christian Federation, committees for religious equality, even mainstream political parties circulate it even now. Right, sir?'

'What you just saw is just another instance of how our religion has decayed from within. This religion makes its followers place more value on an animal that we're *supposed to* consider as our mother but cares nothing about the feelings of a son for his *real* mother. Ah! I think this is a good point—I'll expand this and write a full-length essay.' The professor had regained his force now.

'Now we understand why you became a revolutionary, sir,' said the other Progressive and then, 'We haven't eaten anything since morning and I guess even you haven't. Should we stop somewhere? Kunigal has some good restaurants.'

'Yes. I'm hungry, too.'

'Veg or non-veg?' the driver asked.

'Non-veg, as a protest.'

Once he was comfortably seated in the bar and restaurant, the professor felt dizzy. A sinking feeling. The intellectual force that had briefly returned in

the car deserted him now. *Support. I need to tie my mind to something.* The two cigarettes he had smoked didn't help. 'Do you mind me ordering a peg?'

'Not at all, sir! Please go ahead. He has to drive. I need to get back to my office once we reach Bangalore. You please have it.'

Both Progressives knew that 'a peg' was not to be taken literally. The professor looked at the omelette the waiter had placed on the table and glanced at him. 'Do we get beef here?'

'You get all that in Bangalore city. If we make that here, the villagers will torch this hotel in no time. We make chicken, mutton…pork, rarely. Why do you ask, sir?'

'Just curious.'

He looked at his companions and flashed a knowing smile.

He lay down on the long back seat of the car and slept for the rest of the journey.

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The nap refreshed him. He felt relaxed and felt clarity returning to him but he was still disturbed. The solution was to share everything with somebody. But who? He was a much-sought-after public figure and not just in Bangalore—the count of his followers was spread across all major Indian cities. Prominent universities, non-government organizations, committees, forums and trusts in Bombay, Delhi, and Calcutta accorded him the status of a guru and hung on to every word he spoke. But he couldn't share these things with even *one* of his hundreds of admirers. That would dim the brilliance he cultivated around his image. If he did that, they would turn around and reproach him in public pretty much like a heretic castigated by the pious. It would vaporize everything he had built over a lifetime.

He longed for just one friend who would listen to his outpouring without passing judgement. *Nothing remains after you're dead. Memories, thoughts, ideology, imagination, creativity, feelings…hmm hmm! It's all here when you breathe, when your nerves work, and when the brain, the master controller of your nervous network, functions. If that stops, you're dead even if you're living. Death ceremonies—the seventh day, tenth day, eleventh day, the auspicious thirteenth day, institutions to commemorate, all these are man-made devices to preserve the memory of the dead.* It didn't help. His mother continued to haunt him more intensely each time he tried to put her out of his

thoughts with the aloofness of cold reasoning. *I might as well do the rites. I'm her son after all. I'll get my head tonsured and just nod and do whatever the priest says…and besides, Father himself said rituals now aren't as severe as they were in ancient times. It'll be over quickly and painlessly. The best way to get rid of this torture. And then there are many things we hate but still do for others' happiness. We call the baboon-like kid of our boss cute. This will be a new learning. I've never done any death-related rites. I'll see what the fuss is. Oh! I know those priests…they'll weave fantastic explanations for each ceremony and sponge away as much money as they can…I'll find out what exact meaning they'll…and who knows that'll give me material to write a couple of pieces exposing their fraud.*

None of this lessened the sickly, defeatist feeling inside him. There was no way he could confide this to Elizabeth. They had completely stopped talking for over a year now. But that wasn't the real reason. He knew what would ensue if he said he was considering atoning for eating beef. He could hear her words. 'That means you're saying the food habits of my entire faith are somehow wicked. Which other domestic animal gives you that quantity of meat? Sheep and goat don't contain even a tenth of what beef gives you, let's not even talk about chicken. What're we supposed to do if we give up beef? I don't buy your "sympathetic" logic that every living creature has a right to live, that cruelty to animals is bad because…because it's against the law of nature. How will a tiger live without deer? Or a snake without the frog*?*' Even without this argument, she'd still use her 'freedom-to-practice-my-faith' card. Her faith laid down that the whole of creation—plants, trees, herbs and animals—was created for man's enjoyment. That meant you couldn't discriminate between the kind of meat you ate. *She was never a friend. How can someone who's not a friend ever be a wife? Why am I even living with her?* He lit a cigarette.

The phone issued a long ring twice before he picked it up. A long distance call. His mood suddenly lifted.

'Lakshmi here, sir. I'm calling you from Kunigal. Your brother-in-law wants to talk to you. Just a second.'

The professor heard Subbanna's voice, 'Jayaram came to the village half an hour after you left. I don't know if you remember. He's Meenakshi's son. He drove down from Madras. He's an engineer in a very large software company there. He's doing very well. You must look at his car. It's like a ship. We've come in his car to Kunigal. Everyone's here. Vishalakshi,

Meenakshi and Jalajakshi. We wanted to talk to you. I still think it's best for you to do the rites. You're the son and you must discharge your debt to your mother. We've already spoken to Virupaksha Sastri. He said your father is an authority in these matters and he agreed to what your father prescribed. He says that's the right way to go about the atonement rites. Come back here. Word of your mother's death has already reached all relatives. The house will be packed with no place to sit or sleep. Boys and men will sleep at the temple. That way, you'll have some company. And then you need to stay in the temple for just three days and three nights and not move out anywhere. We'll get you fruits and milk. Three days will pass by really quickly. The main thing is the repentance has to occur within you. And the decision of whether you want to write an apology in the newspapers is entirely yours… one second…I'll give her the phone.'

He had never heard Vishalakshi's voice on the phone. And then Meenakshi spoke. And then Jalakashi. And then Jayaram spoke, 'Uncle, I don't think you remember seeing me but I've seen you several times on TV. I mean, they show you delivering speeches and participating in debates and giving opinions on important public matters and mourning the death of famous people. Each time you come on TV, I call my wife and tell her you're my uncle. Anyway, I think it's…legally more tenable for you to do the rites than Elder Aunty's husband. I drove down to Narasapura when I heard the news and I'm leaving early tomorrow. I have some important office work or I'd have stayed. I'll return on the thirteenth day.'

Lakshmi spoke again. 'Sir, even I'd like you to come here. This could be your last chance to re-establish your relationship with your family. Recall that proverb about mother and motherland being greater than heaven. Your native place is as sacred as your mother.'

The professor decided to go. *It'll be an experience. Spending three days entirely in a temple! After that I can stay at Lakshmi's house.* The temple was part of his childhood. He had played robber-police, catch-me-if-you-can, and hide and seek in its spacious compound. He had slept on its portico in the afternoons. Wasn't it where the shepherds rested in the afternoons?

'All right. Because you're all insisting so much, I don't have a heart to refuse. I'll be there day after tomorrow.' He put the phone down and lit another cigarette and stared out of the window. He felt soothed. *How well the boy talks! I didn't know Madras TV channels showed me! And he called me uncle. Blood is thicker than water. I'm his mother's elder brother after all.*

He felt a sudden rush of affection for Jayaram. He made a mental note to drop into Jayaram's house the next time he was in Madras. He dwelt on the speciality and distinction of the Kannada language for a bit. He was his son-in-law. Son-in-law—sodara aliya in Kannada—was a term applied to serve dual purposes: sister's son and daughter's husband. He thought about it. In the past when it was common to conduct marriages among maternal relations, the necessity to use a separate word each to denote a sister's son and daughter's husband didn't probably arise. Jayaram occupied his mind as he ate his dinner alone. *He must be thirty-two or thirty-three. About five years older to Aruna. What a smart boy! He'd have made a perfect match for Aruna.* For the next several minutes, his mind was fixated on this missed opportunity.

Sleep eluded him for a long time. Something suddenly clicked. *Agarwal from Gandhi Foundation has been pestering me for months to write something for his quarterly journal. Now is the time!* The words began to flow in his mind. *The perfect title:* Cow and Gandhian Economics. **'***Research has proved that the old-fashioned but natural method of cultivation is the best instead of tractors and chemical fertilizers: the kind of natural farming that involves the use of oxen and cows. The benefits are immense. Cows help the farmer in not just tilling. They provide manure and the crop harvested this way is healthier. This means a ban on cow slaughter is both necessary and urgent.' Perfect! Two birds with one stone and all that. This piece is my public atonement and anyway no Progressive reads that Delhi-based journal. But if someone does, and I know them…oh well, let them. All that is part of Gandhian economics. A one-liner is enough to silence them: 'My essay is entirely in line with Gandhian economics and these are not my personal views on the matter.*' He decided to write it tomorrow and mail it immediately and then leave for Narasapura the day after. The professor then slept soundly.

He awoke early and took a short, brisk walk and felt fresh. He finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and began his Gandhian economics piece. The phone rang when he was on the second para.

'Sir, it's us.'

'Sorry, I don't know who this is.'

'We came with you to your village yesterday.'

'You! Okay okay, now make it quick. I'm writing something.'

'I'm sorry. But I had to tell you something. Some folks out here suspect

that you're going to your village to do the atonement rites and your mother's death ceremonies. They've sent spies to watch your every move. I called to warn you that they're working on some secret project to tarnish you. They plan to bring out some book or something, sir.'

'But I said I'm not doing all that. You were there when I said that. Didn't you tell them?'

'We did, sir, but they said you're a double-dealer. They said that's just a mask that you're wearing and that you really will go do those rites and that's why they've sent their CIDs. They asked us to keep this secret.'

'This is really unfortunate. This is such a private matter. It wasn't decent of you to reveal my mother's death and everything that happened in my village.'

'We're sorry but last night in the party, the conversation drifted to this and that and we began to talk about how Hinduism has decayed today. We had to narrate what we saw earlier yesterday in your house as an illustration of that decay. But we took your side, sir. We said you're an unfortunate victim who has guts and perseverance to battle such evils.'

'Who were there at the party?'

'How does it matter, sir?'

'Kalenahalli Prakash Gowda, Ramaraju, Anandappa Badigerahalli, Jayendra Hunsur would've definitely been there.'

'You know everything, sir. I'm sure you have your own CIDs.'

'Psha! I don't need any CIDs. These bloody criminals came to fame using me as their ladder and now they want to turn back and spit on me! I'll crush the rogues. I'll make sure nothing they write will ever be published anywhere. Go tell them I'm going to destroy them!' He banged the phone down and stood there hissing with rage. He stood like that for a long time, staring at the phone and began to mull over his uncharacteristic display of rage. *I shouldn't have yelled. What the hell! Let the bastards know even I can get angry. I don't need to worry about these local cheapskates. I'm nationally famous…no! I have international recognition. None of these insects have standing invitations to give talks in universities abroad.* That instilled self-confidence. Now he felt hungry. He called out to Catherine Kutty and asked her to make him some omelette and toast. He rounded that breakfast off with a couple of bananas and washed it down with strong coffee, went to his study and lit a cigarette. *Kalenahalli Prakash. Whoreson. This is how he repays my affection. I went to the bastard's daughter's marriage before going to see my*

parents. And he pays me back by ganging up with the others who want to screw me. I told him not to contest. But bastard was in a hurry to become an MLA. And he lost like I knew he would. And he blamed me for his defeat. 'You didn't canvas wholeheartedly.' I will wreck him and that whole gang of sons of bitches. I'm not Professor Sastri if I don't do this! He took a silent vow.

He returned to his computer but his mood was completely ruined. Fifteen minutes later, he was sprawled on the bed. He'd lose nothing by not writing the piece. He closed his eyes. *Women have a special fondness for the son-in-law rather than their own sons…Subbanna has anyway tonsured his head and he's cremated her. Mother was fond of him…let him do the rest. That son of a bitch Prakash Gowda lives in the neighbouring village…I'm sure he'll send his spies if I go there. His dogs will report to the master—Sastri slept in the temple. Sastri shaved his head. Sastri gifted a cow to some Brahmin. Sastri fell at the feet of Brahmins. Sastri…bloody bastard Prakash Gowda will use this information against me…he'll write a vile gossip piece…I am Professor Sastri. I don't care. I'll write another one. I'll call him an uncouth wretch who doesn't realize the sanctity of motherhood. When Adi Shankara could breach a renunciate's prohibition and carry out his mother's last rites, it only means how even such great men recognized the holiness of motherhood.* He sat up on the bed and lit a cigarette.

He changed his mind by evening. *Let Subbanna do the rites here. I'll go to Gaya and do the Gaya rites directly. All that matters is faith. If my faith is strong, Mother will reach the feet of Lord Vishnu directly. Go to Gaya and offer the pinda—the sacred rice ball to the departed soul once and you won't ever have to do the annual death rites. I'll go alone like I've fought all my battles alone…these bastards will stalk me here and in Narasapura till the Vaikuntha day—the Thirteenth and last day. I won't move out of Bangalore. I will remain in Bangalore, pick up every phone call and then after the Thirteenth Day rites are done, I'll travel to Gaya. Professor Sinha, my long-time admirer and fellow ideologue, has given me a standing invitation to talk on 'Materialism and Progress' in Patna University. I'll call him. He'll get me travel reimbursement. Bangalore–Patna–Bangalore. Two lectures. Ten thousand. I could use some of that to do the Gaya rites.*

He opened his address book, looked under S and called Sinha who was pleased to hear from Sastri.

'Consider it fixed. Tell me what flight you're taking. I'll pick you up from

the airport.'

The professor thought for a moment. He knew Sinha was a committed Progressive. He knew he couldn't escape from the man's clutches once he agreed to his airport-pickup offer. And then the professor knew he wouldn't be able to hide his Gaya visit from Sinha.

'I haven't booked my flight. I don't know what flight I'll get. Please don't take the trouble. I'm sure to land there a day in advance. Please reserve a room for me in the guest house. I'll reach there directly.'

Professor Sastri stayed in town till the thirteenth day. He attended four public functions. He separately issued weighty opinions on a few matters of public concern and made sure they got proper media coverage. His pictures were splashed prominently in the newspapers.

No phone call came from Narasapura. His sisters, brothers-in-law… nobody called. He decided to inform them later, after he had done the Gaya rites as a substitute for those rites, which would only serve to humiliate him with their atonement nonsense.

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Professor Sastri was well-travelled in north India but his travels were pretty much limited to the major cities. His travel pattern was almost a photocopy: get greeted by a bunch of volunteers holding placards that showed his name at the airport, then taxied to a guest house or a star hotel and spend a day or a week at most, addressing vast audiences. This made it almost impossible for him to learn Hindi. He understood the language when others spoke it but this understanding was an approximation. It was impossible for him to form a complete sentence when he spoke. He used English grammatical rules when he spoke Hindi and when a Hindi word escaped him, he simply replaced it with what he thought was its English equivalent. When that didn't work, he used the Kannada equivalent. Gaya presented no such linguistic problem for the professor. The pandas—priests who conducted the ceremonies—were fluent in almost every Indian language. Gaya was one of the holy destinations that received thousands of people from all over the country. The panda whom he met spoke excellent Kannada and English.

'Five thousand, all-inclusive. The priest's offering and barber's fees are all included in this.'

The professor agreed. Five thousand was half of his lecture tour's

earnings.

‘But I have a condition. I don’t want to shave my head completely. Just take off a few strands as a token.’

The panda agreed and sprinkled a few drops of water on his head and began to chant some mantras. He called the barber and whispered something in his ears in Hindi and left the place. The barber asked the professor to follow him and made him sit on a smooth rock by the river. The barber asked him to wait for sometime.

I should have gone to Narasapura…shouldn’t have been scared of those whoresons. Subbanna is a good man. He’ll do the ceremony with complete faith but I am her son. I should’ve done it. I’ve upset everybody—Subbanna, my sisters, Lakshmi and Father, above all. At this age. Who knows when he’ll die? And I know what he’ll…oh, he’d have already decided that I wouldn’t do his last rites…there was no way a son who didn’t perform his mother’s death ceremonies would perform the father’s…did Shankaracharya visit Gaya? Must ask the panda…hey! Hey! Oy! What’s he done? Bloody barber! The professor seethed with rage and touched his head with quivering fingers. He quickly moved his fingers around and down over his right cheek. The bastard barber had completely razed the right side from head to beard. The professor repeatedly touched his head and cheek and yelled at the barber,

‘Mirror, mirror! Give me a mirror!’ he gestured, his hands mimicking the contempt and rage that issued from his voice.

The barber looked at him blankly.

‘Mirror!’

The barber raised his right hand, which held the razor and gestured and said something that the professor didn’t understand.

‘Mirror! Mirr…Panda! Panda! Call the panda!’ he yelled again.

The barber left to look for the panda. He quickly scanned the shoreline to see if he was there. No. The obvious other place was the bus stand where throngs of pandas typically waited for pilgrims and the faithful. He found the panda amid a group of some fifty of his peers waiting for the next bus that would bring them potential customers.

‘Look what he’s done!’ the professor shouted when the panda met him again.

‘What happened, sahib?’ the panda asked in a soothing tone.

‘I had *specifically* instructed you… *clearly* told you to shave *a few* strands. Look what he’s done!’

‘Oh oh oh! Yes, yes. I remember. I told this fellow…’ he turned to the barber and spoke rapidly in Hindi.

The barber looked directly into the professor’s eyes and said, ‘This is not a salon to get those fashion cuts. And I shave hundreds of people daily. I forgot the panda’s instructions but you listen, sahib—nobody does the rice-offering ritual without shaving their head completely. I *know* the scriptures and rules.’

The professor didn’t understand this. The panda translated it for him and said in the same soothing tone, ‘What can we do now, sahib? I think it is best if you get it fully shaved. I mean, I can adjust the mantras according to your needs but these barbers are very stubborn in the matters of scriptures.’

‘No! I’ve had enough of this nonsense and I’ve had enough of this ritual. Return my money, I’m leaving.’

‘What money?’

‘The five thousand rupees. I gave it to you.’

‘I don’t have it with me. I gave it to the head panda in front of you. He directs everything. We just carry out his orders.’

‘Cheating! You’ve cheated me! Return my money *now* or I’ll go to the police!’ the professor screamed.

‘Police? What police? Remember, you’ve come to a holy place and *you* are going back on your word, not me. This is new. People come here with the pure faith that the rites they do here will give their parents and ancestors a place in heaven. And you’re saying words which will take you to hell,’ the panda said in a tone that matched the professor’s.

By then, a crowd of about ten other pandas had collected around them. The professor explained his story.

‘The barber is right. Get the left side shaved and finish your ritual quickly,’ they said in unison.

The professor touched his freshly-shaven cheek and looked at the group and signalled the barber. No other way. The left side had to go.

He returned to the hotel room after finishing the rites and looked at his face in the mirror. For some reason, his face and bald head reminded him of Subbanna’s face and head. This was how rituals worked. He felt sorry for yelling at the poor barber. But this was a new problem. He slept on it that night, and in the morning he thought of buying a topi and launched into deeper thought as to the exact topi that would suit him. A Gandhi topi would be good, but a Jayaprakash Narayan topi would be even better. Actually a hat

would be the best. But a topi didn't make the problem go away. It simply covered it. He still owed an explanation to Sinha who he was sure would wonder about the reason behind the professor's denuded head. In the end, the professor bought a black topi. Then it occurred to him—he'd say he had some skin infection on his pate and he had shaved his head on the doctor's advice.

'The dermatologist said the lotion wouldn't really work unless it touches the skin directly. I had to shave my head completely,' he told Sinha without being asked for any explanation.

'You're right. It's always best to follow the doctor's advice.' he agreed.

But when Sinha took the air tickets to prepare the travel allowance and dearness allowance bills, the professor realized what he had done. His ticket showed Benares as the last destination. 99 per cent of people who landed in Patna would definitely visit Gaya to do the Gaya rites. This fact wouldn't escape Sinha's notice. But Sinha said nothing. He signed on the bill that gave the Professor airfare from Bangalore–Benares–Bangalore and a first class train journey from Benares–Patna–Benares.

The two lectures on 'Materialism and Progress' were enormously successful. It was one of the professor's star lectures. He had spoken on this theme for over two decades almost everywhere he went. He needed no preparation; the words flowed, out of habit. The audience swayed and clapped loudly for a long time and mobbed him. Professor Sastri's stardom was renewed.

In the train on his way to Benares, he decided to retain the black topi throughout his stay in the workshop there. And then in America, he needed no topi. Nobody cared if you wore a hat or cap or topi or went bald. America had real freedom.

When I return, my hair would've regrown.

12

Diganth and Babita rushed to Narasapura the moment they heard the news. The couple suggested immersing their grandmother's ashes in Prayag. Shesha Sastri endorsed this and recommended travelling to Prayag on an auspicious day after all the rites were complete. Subbanna, who had performed every single rite starting with the cremation up until now, had to undertake the journey.

'Uncle, please take a flight. We'll buy you the tickets,' Diganth said.

But there was a practical problem. The ashes had to be carried in a sealed clay pot very carefully. Subbanna had never taken a flight before. And they were unsure of the airport security rules and decided to make a train journey. It also helped that Lakshmi had planned to visit Benares. The family requested her to take Subbanna and Vishalakshi till Prayag and once the immersion rites were done, to help them board a return train to Bangalore. She agreed although her plan was to stay back at Benares after helping them board the train to Bangalore.

Lakshmi had decided to visit Kashi once more. The visit was necessary if she had to portray Aurangzeb's destruction of the Kashi Vishwanath temple and the construction of the Gyanvapi mosque on the same site authentically in the novel. She didn't really need any company. She had come to enjoy her solitude. Her reality was inside the locked doors of her father's study in the hundreds of years of history and in the characters she had created. They spoke to her when she took breaks and walked in the fields and they looked down at her from the mango trees and the tall coconut trees. Kenchappa and Lakshmamma didn't speak to her on their own volition. She had looked forward to her journey to Benares alone. She had thought of recalling the story of each station the train stopped at. Recalling the historical or real name of the region it belonged to, and over the past thousand years, the king who had ruled it originally and how it had passed on to other kings, sultans and nawabs, and the temples and Jain basdis, viharas, and Buddhist stupas in the

vicinity, and which badshah or sultan or nawab had destroyed them or left them unharmed. She had imagined the journey to be instructive, teaching her the history of the subcontinent in a different way.

As she had expected, Vishalakshi and Subbanna dragged her into their conversation. Vishalakshi was older to her by eight years and addressed her in the first person. Lakshmi had known Subbanna a little when she was studying in college. And so, despite a difference in age of almost thirteen years, he addressed her in the second person. Two and half days of train journey and every topic eventually turned to Professor Sastri. At least Vishalakshi made sure it did.

'I'm not saying every educated person becomes like this but why did he turn out this way? Like that proverb about a monkey spoiling not just itself but the entire garden…but see, these are not my words. Our Narasimhe Gowda, your father, told me this. He quoted the same proverb. You're smart enough to know in what context he said…'

Subbanna cut her off. 'That's an old story and it's over. Why do you rake it up now? Do you even have any sense of what you talk?'

Lakshmi felt bad for her. She knew Vishalakshi was unrefined, rustic and very direct. 'No. no. it's okay. Don't feel bad. She told the truth.'

Subbanna said, 'Even then, one must not tell an unpleasant truth. "Na bruyaat satyamapriyam",' he quoted the Sanskrit maxim.

They had reservation up to Itarsi. They spoke to a fellow traveller who recommended taking the train that left half an hour later. The plan was to alight at Mughal Sarai. Kashi was just ten miles from there. Plenty of buses and rickshaws and taxis plied to Kashi and Prayag.

'Let's go to Kashi first. We'll stay there for a day and then head to Prayag,' said Subbanna.

They reached Mughal Sarai at 10 a.m. Lakshmi hired two cycle rickshaws. The couple sat in one of them, and she in the other. The pot of ashes encased in a white lungi and tied securely at the neck rested securely on Subbanna's lap. Fifteen minutes after they left Mughal Sarai behind them, the distance between the two cycle rickshaws had grown to about a furlong. The rickshaw drivers were brothers. The driver of Lakshmi's rickshaw was a thin man of about thirty years. His skin was charred black. He wore a piece of cloth that served as his lungi. Sweat drops continuously trickled down from his sleeveless short shirt. A roll of dirty thread that looked like the sacred thread peeked from the left shoulder of his sleeveless shirt. A saffron cloth

covered his head like a bandanna.

‘Bhai, what’s your name?’

‘Biswanath Sarma,’ he said between taking breaths.

‘Is that Sarma or Sharma?’

‘The same. What you said. Sarma.’

‘Sarma. That means you’re a Brahmin?’

‘Yes, mataji. We’re Kanyakubja Brahmins.’

‘You’re a Brahmin and you peddle a cycle rickshaw?’

‘What else should we do for a living, mataji?’

‘But…’ She stopped abruptly, unsure how to frame the question appropriately. He pulled to the side, slowed down and halted the rickshaw under a shady margosa tree. He opened the string of the pouch tied to the handlebar, extracted a paan, put it in his mouth and began to chew it slowly. A while later, he said, ‘Mataji, you were asking something… I know…you wanted to ask me…’ He paused, then, ‘A Brahmin’s duty is to voluntarily embrace poverty. From the ancient times, this caste has always lived in hermitages in the forest far away from civilization and devoted itself to lifelong learning and transmitting knowledge in the society. Right? Every badshah, sultan and nawab realized that a complete annihilation of this caste was the only way to convert Hindus to Islam. They rounded up Brahmins and forced their mouths open with tongs and spat into it because they knew that would defile their caste. They slit their throats and burned them alive. Thousands of our ancestors fled to the interior villages and began to narrate stories and sermons from our mythology and scriptures to the people and managed to preserve the Hindu faith. When the Angrezis…Britishers came, they quickly realized that breaking the back of this caste would help them make the whole of India into Kiristan. The Angrezis have left but our own leaders continue to fuel hatred against Brahmins to get votes,’ he smiled wryly. She saw the paan juice bobbing in his mouth.

‘If you know so much, I’m sure you also know the history of Kashi in depth. Will you show me around Kashi for about two to three days?’

‘I will, mataji. I’ll show you every inch of Kashi and tell you the story of every pillar and temple and mosque.’

‘What have you studied?’ she was curious now. She guessed that he must at least have a BA from some university. Maybe an MA in Indian history.

‘A bit of Sanskrit. I know the Tulsi Ramayan by heart. I learnt it mostly by listening. Mataji, everybody in Kashi *must* know everything about Kashi.

He must know the story of every stone in this sacred city or he's not fit to live here.' He looked at the road and said, 'They would've gone far ahead. My brother is stronger than I. He pedals faster but I know our holy epics and mythology better than he does. Let's go.'

She saw history in his words. After temples were destroyed on an industrial scale, after the priests were butchered by the thousand and when no idols survived for people to worship, Hinduism survived largely through the oral tradition of the wandering bards and monks. Hymns, verses, poetry, stories and discourses became the means of survival of an ancient religion. When Hinduism could no longer be practised openly, it led to a dilution in the priestly tradition of chanting Vedic hymns in Sanskrit. However, Hindus gave expression to their religious ideals in regional tongues. This development flowed with greater force and became widespread as saints began to emerge from the lower castes. It used and assimilated folk tales and symbols and led to a rapid reinvigoration of the faith. This time, its strength had acquired a new dimension: the Bhakti or devotional aspect of Hinduism overflowed throughout the land.

She was jolted out of her rumination by what met her eyes.

Kashi!

The enormous sprawl that seemed to suddenly unfold itself before her eyes dazzled under the exploding rays of the afternoon sun. *Or is that Kashi*?

'Which place is that, Sarmaji?'

'Kashi, mataji. Benares.'

'Really?'

'Yes, mataji. No doubt.'

From this distance, the towering mosque appeared like a gigantic fist that had wrapped the whole of Kashi in its thrall. Its dominating presence commanded the sight of every visitor much before he actually entered Kashi. Lakshmi wished she had binoculars. She strained her eyes. She could detect a line of ghats just below the mosque. To its right stood another mosque, not as imposing but tall and eye-catching.

'Sarmaji, I see only mosques. Where's the Vishwanath temple?'

'Oh? Didn't you know, mataji? See that mosque on the left…' He pointed with his index finger. 'The tall, fat mosque that looks like it is sniggering because it's the biggest mosque in Kashi? That's the Gyanvapi masjid standing on the original Kashi Vishwanath temple. Aurangzeb Badshah demolished it and built a gumbaz over its walls and pillars in 1669. And

though he did all this, people still call it the Gyanvapi mosque. And see the mosque at the right? That's where the Bindu Madhava temple stood. He demolished that in 1659 and used its pillars and stones and beams to raise this Alamgiri Masjid. That's what you see now.'

Impressive! He even knows the dates! The best man to tell me the history of all the mosques out here. She put her bent right palm on her forehead to avoid the harsh sunlight and looked around the entire city. *Littered with mosques. Everywhere. Size doesn't matter. Every mosque built on a pre-existing temple. Built to mark Islam's supremacy. Using the materials of the same destroyed temple. Kashi. Varanasi. Home to Hinduism's multi-hued sects and paths and schools. Vedic, Jain, Buddhist, Shaakta, Tantra, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Ganapatya, Rama, Krishna…Kashi opened her portals to everybody. There's no god or goddess who hasn't a home in Kashi. Every form of worship that exists in India exists here. People flocked here from all sorts of remote, nameless villages, braving robber gangs and spending their savings to pay the pilgrim tax that the sultans imposed on Hindus, driven only by an unwavering faith that death in Kashi ensured freedom from the endless cycles of birth and death. Every sect has a temple dedicated to its chief deity. Every minor and major god and goddess and character in our mythology has a house of worship in Kashi. No other city has as many temples. That explains all these mosques here. Ruled for centuries by the people of a faith who believed that destroying the temples of other faiths and erecting mosques in their place was the definition of religious piety. Kashi welcomed every religion, sect, creed and nourished them equally like a mother, and Kashi would have given Islam all the land it wanted in keeping with her spirit. And Islam in keeping with its spirit of surviving exclusively…a spirit that always meant the annihilation of other religions…decimated all the temples here and built mosques on their graves.*

The ghats were clearer now. Every ghat had a name. Assi ghat, Hanuman ghat, Shivala ghat, Baccharaj ghat, Anandamayi ghat, Kedar ghat, Chauki ghat, Narad ghat, Amritrao ghat, Chausatti ghat, Pandey ghat, Rana ghat, Dashashwamedh ghat, Manikarnika ghat, Bhosala ghat, Yagneshwara ghat, Rama ghat, Mangalagowri ghat, Dalapat ghat…she couldn't recall the rest of the names. Manikarnika was built by the Maratha ruler Baji Rao. Actually, these were built by the Marathas or at least in the time of the Maratha kings. She decided to revisit Motichandra and Diana Eck's scholarly work on Varanasi. She began to think about the alternate history of Kashi. A history

where Kashi passed on directly from the Mughals to the British without the rise of the Marathas and asked herself whether it would have survived—whether Hindus would have had their rebirth. Her eyes were focused on the row of ghats in front of her but she stopped seeing them.

~

Vishalakshi insisted that it was irreligious to stay in a hotel in sacred Kashi. They were pilgrims, not tourists. She ate restaurant food without feeling guilty back in Bangalore and elsewhere but her conviction in these matters was firm. It was mandatory to stick to some precepts when you visited holy sites like Kashi and Rameswaram. And now they were here to perform the holiest of rites of immersing her mother's ashes in Prayag. Subbanna and Lakshmi thought it made sense. Biswanath Sarma, the cycle-rickshaw driver, seconded her view.

'You are from Karnataka. There's a Mysore rest house right above Harishchandra ghat. But that'll be a problem for you because you'll have to put up with the smell of burning bodies throughout the day. I think it is best you stay at the Marwadi's rest house next to Manmandir ghat. It's clean and hygenic. They allow everybody there. I know the manager, come with me.' Sarma led them to the Marwadi rest house. Vishalakshi liked the food that was served in the hall next to it. It was cooked in the Vaishnava style and it was tasty, healthy and vegetarian.

Evening had set in. 'I'll see you early tomorrow. I'll get a panda with me. He knows all the rites really well and he'll perform yours on priority, no matter how many others are waiting for their turn. If you're not tired, you can visit the Vishwanath temple now. I'll show you around,' he said.

He pulled his cycle rickshaw to the neighbouring Dashashwamedh ghat, turned right and entered a narrow, crowded alley which was thronged with sellers of marigold flowers, petty vendors of fruits and hawkers selling items of worship. Each hawker called out to pilgrims to buy only from him and offered them the service of depositing their footwear at his shop for free. The alley was packed to the brim with both pilgrims and locals who visited the Vishwanath temple every day, although it was evening.

'Careful with your purse, gold and money,' Sarma said and then pointed, 'Kashi Vishwanath.'

'Wha…where? Which one?' Vishalakshi asked, looking in the direction

of Sarma's pointed finger. Subbanna looked similarly confused. And then they saw it. Nothing had prepared them to expect this fraction of a temple. It looked like it was built by a mendicant who had gone around the village begging for money and finally built something that resembled a temple from the modest sum of accumulated small change. There was no place for devotees to even circumambulate the temple.

'…this is Kashi Vishwanath?' Subbanna and Vishalakshi exclaimed together, looking at Sarma as if he was at fault. Lakshmi wasn't surprised. She had known what to expect, but despite that her heart sank.

'People worship this…*canopy* as the Vishwanath temple?' Subbanna asked.

'Let me show you.' Sarma pushed his way through the throng and led them to the stone idol of Nandi.

'Look. Every Shiva temple has a Nandi, which directly faces Lord Vishwanath. He meditates upon the lingam inside every Shiva temple…you know that.' He paused, then, 'Now look at this Nandi. Look at what he faces.'

The three of them looked intently. It struck Lakshmi instantly. She recalled what she had seen as they were approaching Kashi from Mughal Sarai. Kashi was still about six miles. From that distance she clearly saw how the intimidating Gyanvapi mosque, standing for centuries on the grave of the Vishwanath temple, ruled over the skies of Kashi, nonchalant in its unbending arrogance. The triumph of Aurangzeb's religious zeal. And now she saw how well-protected it was. Not even a mosquito could get inside the impregnable, twelve-feet-high fence of intestine-piercing barbed wire. The monkeys that were ubiquitious in Kashi, ruling the place with their fearless antics, snatching food and bags from people, also stayed away from this place. Army personnel stood guard around the mosque, one battle-ready solider every four feet brandishing an automatic rifle. The sight shook both Subbanna and his wife. Despite her vast reading, Lakshmi failed to grasp the message this scene conveyed.

'Our government has built fences, and our soldiers are guarding the mosque that Aurangzeb built by destroying the Vishwanath temple,' Sarma said.

~

Sleep was impossible, despite the fatigue of three days of non-stop train travel that included the sleepless night from Itarsi to Mughal Sarai, which they had spent sitting as they didn't get a sleeper berth. Both Subbanna and Vishalakshi had slept early and now were in deep sleep. Gyanvapi mosque taunted Lakshmi the moment she closed her eyes. Her mind conjured violent images of the structure. Its tentacles extended to the ends of Kashi's horizon and beyond, gripping the city in its power. It stood there on Kashi's heart, crushing its ribcage and strangling its breath. She felt relief when she opened her eyes, as if she had been set free from some prison. She sat up and just sat there in the dark, trying to catch the sound of the Ganga flowing about forty to fifty feet just below from where she was sitting. She heard nothing. *This is a noiseless river. Actually, Ganga is a dynamic culture that accommodates and digests everything and flows on quietly. These banks are the timeless witnesses of never-ending debates in philosophy and logic. Every philosophical school has come here. One school has argued with the other and they've all argued with one another and written treatises and refutations. Saints have meditated here. Leaders of various sects and cults have sung praises of their cult's central god. Atheists have thundered out their atheism here. And yet, being witness to such noise over the centuries, Ganga continues to flow in contented silence.* She felt like sitting by the riverside. She got up noiselessly, locked the door, taking care not to disturb the sleeping couple, crossed the alley and came to the ghat. The river looked like a long slab of mirror reflecting the clear full moon light. She looked to her left and saw the mighty Gyanvapi mosque appearing to her like a symbol of aggressive hubris while the river on whose banks it stood coursed on as if it didn't exist.

'Aurangzeb's order to demolish the Vishwanath temple quickly reached Kashi. With it a precaution to prevent and, if necessary, quell the massive rebellion that would erupt from the Hindus. The subedaar personally stepped into every alley and posted Muslim soldiers at every corner. The priests caught the scent. They knew it was futile to mount a physical attack to save the temple. Overnight, they entered the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, performed the necessary rituals to remove the original idol of the lingam, lowered it into the neighbouring Gyanvapi well, filled the well to the brim with mud, flattened it, wiped all traces and left the place. Kashi Vishwanath temple was razed the next day but the destroyers didn't know what had happened the previous night.' She recalled Sarma's words. Not just Sarma.

Everybody in Kashi knew this.

'Who's there?' She turned to look to the source of the voice that was accompanied by the rough scraping of a boot. 'A lady. You're alone at this hour.' She looked around and saw that she wasn't alone. Some people were seated on the steps. Probably meditating. Or just taking in the silence of the Ganga, trying to merge with the silence. There was an exchange between them: 'Where are you from?'; 'Different country?'; 'Name of the rest house?' The stink of bidi smoke from his mouth. 'Why have you come here alone at this hour? Don't go near the water.'; 'You might get into trouble with goons.'

Later, she saw him walk towards the Dashashwamedh ghat. She looked to her right and saw a row of boats tied to what looked like wooden poles. She sat on the step she was standing upon until now and gazed in the darkness, at nothing in particular. She lost sense of time. The moon had now moved westwards and had grown duller. She forgot what cycle it was in. She didn't even know what today's day was according to the lunar calendar. She decided to learn how to read it. Perhaps Subbanna could teach her. If he didn't she was sure she could learn it from Sastri Ayya. She had to learn it as quickly as possible. He'd leave the village for good to stay in Tumkur with his daughter.

The darkness didn't frighten her. She reminded herself how she had taken perfect shots of street rowdies in less than three takes. And then it flashed to her instantly. *Ah! Hamdullah Kuhfi should accompany Khwaja Jahan to Kashi to witness the destruction of the Vishwanath temple.*

I told Hamdullah Sahib of my desire to witness the demolition of the Kashi Vishwanath temple with my own eyes and prayed to him to facilitate my speedy journey to the place. He told me to give him a day to think it over and asked me to meet him tomorrow. When I met him, he said, 'I'm very pleased with you. Your enthusiasm is infectious, my boy! I can't sit here now, let's go together! Let me accumulate some more virtue by watching the supreme edifice of their dark faith crumble before my eyes. I will write a request to Vazir-e-Azam right away. In it I'll tell him that I must leave for Kashi immediately to witness the holy act of demolishing the kafir structure and to record every minute detail of this pious deed. I'll also tell him that you will be of valuable assistance by accompanying me. Let's see what happens.' His request was approved that evening. As a surprise, he was informed that arrangements were made for them to travel with the messengers travelling to

Kashi.

Monsoon was severe that year and the flooding river forbade travel by boat…

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In the morning, the three of them took the holy bath in the Ganga, offered their prayers to her and climbed up the steps of the Dashashwamedh ghat, heading towards the Vishwanath temple. Sarma and the panda he had brought along walked with them. Had she come here alone, Lakshmi would've done none of this, including the impending worship at the temple. Her ideas about God and religion during her formative years were shaped by her father's deep conviction that non-violence was the only faith and the rest were cultist practices. She had converted to Marxism in college and believed that religion was the opium of the masses, and then developed an almost-religious fervour that the love between a man and woman was the only true religion and from there, was convinced that only Islam guaranteed the purest form of socialism. And then she was convinced that both Islam and Christianity were aggressive imperialisms imposing their beliefs on the world. After travelling this far, she found it hard to practise the rituals and the innumerable forms of worship in Hinduism. She had abandoned them long ago and they didn't come to her naturally now. But she thought it was improper to stay aloof when Vishalakshi and Subbanna, simple people really, were offering worship. This was also her chance to spiritually boycott the imperious Gyanvapi masjid standing with its feet on the grave of the original Vishwanath temple. She found no better way of expressing this boycott than offering a few drops of the Ganga and flowers to the lingam.

As they continued to climb the steps, Vishalakshi stopped in her tracks and yelled in surprise, 'It can't be you! You've come at last, brother!…but… but you had to come. That's the pull of the umbilical cord…Shankaracharya was right. The debt we owe to a mother is the greatest debt. That has brought you here…' Lakshmi had seen him first and suspected it was him but Vishalakshi's non-stop gushing just confirmed it. Professor Sastri stood before them. Black trousers. Red kurta. Green shawl wrapped around his shoulders and a Japanese camera in his hand. All the traces that had previously distinguished him as an intellectual were gone. With his head completely shaved and not a trace of facial hair, he looked as if he was

somebody else. It was clear that he hadn't expected to see them here. His face showed shock, discomfort, confusion and began to turn progressively red.

'…I know I know why you came here directly. If Father wasn't so stubborn, I know you'd have done the rites in the village! We have the ashes in the rest house. You come with us to Prayag tomorrow and do the immersion rites with your own hands.'

The professor struggled to find his voice and when he spoke after a minute, the effort showed, 'I came here to conduct a workshop at the university and…Razia! You're a film-maker! Didn't it occur to you to carry at least a basic tele-camera when you knew you were visiting the Benares ghats? I mean, the Benares landscape means ghats, monkeys, bulls…you've heard it, right? Raand, saand…and…and….well…'

The panda who heard this saw the professor struggling to recall the rest and came to his rescue, 'Raand, saand, seedi, sanyasi.' There was a certain rhythmic quality in the way he intoned each word. 'Sahib has gone to Gaya before coming here?' The professor turned ashen. *How did he know? Bloody fellows! There's no language these pandas don't know. Or they get hold of pilgrims who speak the same language. This shrewd ruffian has figured our relationship just by listening to what Vishalakshi told me.*

'…it's called Tristhali yatra in the scriptures. The pilgrimage includes a visit to Gaya, Kashi and Prayag—all these three places. I'm sure you have come from Gaya. If you haven't done your puja yet here in Kashi, accompany your sister. I'll take you to Prayag,' the panda's words shook him out of his reverie.

'You please carry on. I don't believe in all this. I came here to shoot some photos.' The professor lifted his camera to his face, turned away from them and walked off. *Did he really go to Gaya and get his head tonsured? Would he go with his sister to the temple if I wasn't here? And then he called me Razia, not Lakshmi…what was that again? Lakshmi! My girl from my village.*

They went to Prayag the next day and immersed the ashes. Vishalakshi and Subbanna managed to get confirmed reservations for the train that left four days later. Lakshmi would stay in Kashi for two more weeks. She could stay in this rest house for a week and then stay in a similar one that the rickshaw driver Sarma had promised he would reserve for her. Vishalakshi and Subbanna spent the four days visiting temple after temple on their own. Lakshmi's mind reverted to the novel. She already had a fairly clear idea about how she would shape the portion about the Vishwanath temple

destruction, and she intuitively knew the details would come when she actually sat down to write. She'd already digested an enormous amount of research material. Now she would see the place by foot and learn about the history of each mosque and each temple that was destroyed and then rebuilt. And then the Ganga had her own story to tell. She decided to try and write this portion sitting here in Kashi once Subbanna and his wife boarded the train.

13

I told Hamdullah Sahib of my desire to witness the demolition of the Kashi Vishwanath temple with my own eyes and prayed to him to facilitate my speedy journey to the place. He told me to give him a day to think it over and asked me to meet him the day after. When I met him, he said, 'I'm very pleased with you. Your enthusiasm is infectious, my boy! I simply can't sit here now, let's go together! Let me accumulate some more virtue by watching the supreme edifice of their dark faith crumble before my eyes. I will write a request to Vazir-e-Azam right away. In it, I'll tell him that I must leave for Kashi immediately to witness the holy act of demolishing the kafir structure and to record every minute detail of this pious deed. I'll also tell him that you will be of valuable assistance by accompanying me. Let's see what happens.' His request was approved that evening. As a surprise, he was informed that arrangements were made for them to travel with the messengers travelling to Kashi.

Monsoon was severe that year and floods had peaked. It was impossible to travel by boat. We got a horse each and we had couriers to accompany us. In the beginning the massive horse was a bit of a challenge as I didn't know what commands this beast obeyed and then I was conscious of the two couriers who I knew were watching my riding skills. If I was an ordinary fellow, they would've wasted no time poking fun of me and who knows they would've complained to the chief courier that they couldn't ride with an imbecile like me. But I was with Hamdullah Sahib, he of Persian descent with marble-white, clear skin, flowing beard and blue eyes; anybody could tell that he was a well-learned scholar of Arabic, Persian, Koran and Hadis. And I was his chosen assistant. And I was also a prominent eunuch of Udaipuri Mahal herself. That showed them their place. They displayed immense patience and respect and taught me all the commands. Within three hours, I had a confident hold on the horse and I noticed Hamdullah Sahib was at ease with it. He apparently had long years of practice. The letter the

couriers were carrying had the badshah's royal seal. It was neatly rolled and placed inside a bamboo pipe, reinforced with wooden covering and sealed with wax and placed inside a cloth-bag, which was stitched to the teeth and sealed with the Badshah's royal seal. The couriers' job was to just carry them. They had no idea of the message inside that bag. Only Hamdullah Sahib, under strict orders of secrecy, had authorized knowledge of the contents of the letter and through him, I had unofficial knowledge of it. The journey was a fair bit but it was thankfully on the highway. The direct highway from Delhi to Benares continued even beyond Benares. The couriers told Hamdullah Sahib that to reach Benares they had to touch Shahabad, Ghaziabad, Dana, Hapud, Bagsar, Gad Mukteshwar, Bagadi, Amaroha, Muradabad, Rae Bareilly, Sela, Kada and Dalmavu. The highway was a well-known trade route and it had rest houses for Muslim travellers to stay over, have meals and perform namaz. It had separate facilities for people travelling on government work. Our journey was quite smooth and pleasant though it rained at times. The couriers took special care of the bag they were carrying whenever it rained. We changed horses a few times and reached Benares without event.

On the second day of my stay in Benares, I saw a sudden rush of pilgrims from many different lands who come for some major festival. Pilgrims always outnumber the locals in any pilgrimage city and this was Kashi, the emperor of pilgrimage cities. And if it was a festival, the number swelled enormously because devout Hindus believed that a pilgrimage to Kashi on such days earned them far greater merit than on normal days. 'Child, ever since Muslims began to rule Hindustan, every king imposed pilgrim tax on Hindus—except that infidel Akbar! Hindus are largely an impoverished people. And those Hindus who are in business have to pay twice as much tax as Muslim businessmen. And then they pay jaziya. That leaves them with nothing to go on pilgrimages. You see how many thousands have come here from very far off kingdoms! All by foot. They aren't allowed to ride horses. And then they have to pay pilgrimage tax. And despite all this, if so many have come here, imagine the depth of their dark beliefs!' Hamdullah Sahib was completely astonished at the crowd he saw.

The kotwal visited Hamdullah Sahib, although he was not sent for. He knew his manners before people who came directly from the Badshah's office. He respectfully did mujra. Hamdullah Sahib told me later that even a lowly officer in Delhi gets this kind of respect when he visits a suba. The

kotwal took Hamdullah Sahib to be the officer sent to supervise the temple destruction. He stepped close, bowed and almost whispered, ‘There’s a festival now. You’ll understand the madness of these Hindustanis only if you stay in Benares. We can’t break the temple now…or we’ll have hundreds of thousands of people at our throats. I know truth is on our side but their numbers are greater. Let’s wait for a week. Once the festival is finished, most of the pilgrims will return…Wait…we should wait. And then when they’re gone, I’ll issue a farmaan to evict any outsiders who’re still here. After that, I’ll put our men to guard every street and corner. Then I’ll carry out the badshah’s farmaan. Please beg the pardon of the badshah on my behalf. Please also tell him that I pray to him to not be angry with this humble servant.’

‘When the work concerns faith, the opposition of even a hundred thousand men shouldn’t count. They must be slain. That in itself is faith. But when our numbers are small, we must use strategy. Yes. I agree. You are after all, experts in warfare.’

The kotwal’s face lit up.

We were treated like royalty in the special guest mansion. I hadn’t eaten this kind of food even in Delhi. Variety was limitless. Benares was blessed with a bounty of fruits in both quality and quantity compared to Delhi. It was the mango season. I feasted on an incredibly delicious mixture of mango pulp, ground jaggery and cardamom. Hamdullah Sahib forgot his age and gorged on bowls and bowls of this divine mixture and quickly paid the price. He lay in bed for a couple of days, trying to recover from an upset stomach.

I roamed the streets alone every day. I wanted to explore this holiest of Hindu pilgrimage cities about which I had heard from my days in Devagarh. I couldn’t explain what tugged…it was more than just a tug, it almost bordered on a deep sense of attachment, despite my hatred for the religion that had failed to protect me. I thought my feeling had to do with the fact that my ancestors regarded Kashi with extreme reverence. Actually, it *was* that. I felt that in the first few moments after setting foot here. And I felt it even now although I had learnt to suppress it. In my mind, Kashi had meant just the Vishwanath mandir. But this…this city…it looked like Kashi was immersed in temples. And though they knew from my dress, manners and language that I was a Muslim, people answered any question I asked. Every face that answered my question showed a different expression: of fear and respect because I belonged to the ruling race. Of contempt because I was a mleccha,

a foreigner, an alien. Of servitude in the hope of pleasing me and getting some crumb in return. Of guile, like lying in wait for a chance to plunge a dagger in me. Yet other faces showed an amalgam of all these expressions. They were cows tamed with repeated beatings of the stick. Obedient, faithful and helpful but with the latent rage in the eyes that said that it would gore horribly at the first sign of the master's weakness.

This made me very uncomfortable and I briefly thought of dressing like them—dhoti and a cloth covering the chest. Kashi was anyway a famous centre for cloth trading. There was no dearth for shops and I had enough money to buy some. But I struck off the idea because it was senseless. I could dress like them but there was nothing I could do about my beard, which indicated my religion. And if I shaved it, I knew what lay for me at Hamdullah Sahib's hands. I could tell him I shaved it so I could pass off as one of them and spy on them more conveniently but he wouldn't believe this. These were dangerous experiments.

Every street had at least four to five temples. Some had at least ten. Then there were private temples inside people's houses. Annapoorna, Lakshmi, Parvati, Gowri, Kali, Chandi, Chamundi, Durga…goddesses. And then the names of the lingams were likewise, countless: Brihaspatishwara, Kameshwara, Panchakeshwara, Andhakeshwara, Shanteshwara, Valmikeshwara, Chyawaneshwara, Karkotakeshwara, Bhairaveshwara… tens…hundreds of them…maybe thousands; who knows? I stopped at the Markandeshwara temple and asked a man standing at its entrance the name of the temple. He was about twenty years old.

'Khan sahib, my name is Dadicha Bhatt. I will show you all the temples in Kashi and narrate their powers. You can give me anything you please.'

I looked at him. He had the sacred ash on his forehead and sported the round tilak made of sandal paste in its centre. His head was completely shaved except for a small tuft in the shape of a cow's foot.

'You will need four full days to see all the temples in Kashi just from the outside. That is, if you want to see each temple without the puja. I know in your religion you don't go to temples. So I'll stand outside with you and narrate the history of each temple. Is that fine?'

I nodded and promised to pay him two rupees. He was very happy.

'I have heard that Kashi is full of really well-learned scholars and eminent pundits. Is that true?' I asked.

'Yes, that is true. It has pundits in Vedas, Vedanta, grammar, Mimamsa,

poetry…and not just these…we have Jain and Buddhist scholars and gurus too.'

'What is the reason that so many of these eminent pundits have made Kashi their home?'

'Reason…hmm…' he paused and looked at me with suspicion '…I don't know. I'm not all that learned.'

'Don't be afraid, Bhattji. I am not a spy. Whatever you tell me will not reach another ear. I swear on Allah.' This seemed to convince him.

'After the Muslims demolished the temples, stupas and basdis and killed thousands of Hindu scholars, gurus and teachers and Buddhist bhikkus and saints, those who remained fled from faraway lands like Kashmir, Takshashila, Purushapura, Kanyakubja and Sthaneshwara towards the east to save their lives. Kashi gave them shelter. When Bhaktiar Khalji demolished the Nalanda University and beheaded thousands of Buddhist teachers and scholars there, those that could manage to escape, fled to Tibet, Kashi and Saranath. Then there is the belief that is as old as Time that death in Kashi grants one the freedom from the cycle of birth and death. From the earliest times, people of different philosophical schools from all parts of Bharatavarsha have come to Kashi and some have stayed back permanently. This is why you see such a huge number of scholars here, in Kashi.'

I was astonished—a mere boy, he knew so much. Maybe he's picked it up from listening to the older scholars. He has learnt the Vedas. And he told me he knows all the panda rites very well.

'In each story about the temples you've shown me, the rakshasas, the demons that fought the gods and died in battle, have a lingam and a temple built around it to honour them. Why? I mean, what is the meaning? In that Madhu-Kaitabha story, Madhu and Kaitabha are demons. And here there is a Madhukaitabheshwara temple.'

'Khan Sahib, a person might hate God and think him to be an enemy as long as he is alive. But it is in God's nature to grant a good place in heaven to even such a person. God doesn't hate anybody. Is that not so, Khan Sahib?'

'God doesn't hate anybody? Not even Shaitaan?'

'The Shaitaan that exists in your faith doesn't exist in ours. Our God forgives and takes into his fold even a man who out of ignorance treads the evil path. Like a mother forgives her child's transgressions.'

This fellow's ideas about God didn't match mine…something I had deeply believed in for the last eight years. And what kind of god was he that

didn’t have guts? And when their god himself didn’t have guts, it was no surprise that these people were like this—a cowardly lot. I didn’t want to continue this discussion and asked him to take me to the next temple.

When I met him in the guest mansion after four days of incessant temple-visiting, Hamdullah Sahib asked me what all I’d seen.

‘So many temples that it’s easier to forget than remember.’

‘If you’ve seen that many temples that it’s easy to forget, does it mean you have learnt history?’

I didn’t know how to respond to this and looked at him blankly. I felt stupid and I think it showed on my face. I knew that no matter how upset he was with me, he would never allow his discomfiture to transform itself into anger.

‘You were visiting temples while I went on horseback everyday and saw almost all the mosques. The kotwal has assigned me two maulana sahibs who are learned in history. And this is important. We must listen to and learn history from the locals. What they tell us shows how little we know—we who sit in some chamber and write history in far-off Delhi. Anyway, so Qutubudin Aibak and Shahabuddin Ghori brought Benares under their control in Al Hijra 604 and appointed a very able man named Sayyad Jalaluddin as the subedaar. Sayyad Jalaluddin built a township named Jalaluddinpura near this city. It’s still there. Now, Jalaluddin made a strong attempt to ban idol worship. But very soon, power was wrested away from us in Benares. We had to wait till Al Hijra 607 when Qutubudin recaptured it. From then on, oh! How our faith flourished! They demolished all the idol temples that existed then and used the pillars and other material from the rubble of these temples and built mosques in their place. Have you seen the exquisite, two-towered Gumbaz mosque in the Hanuman-Gate street? No, you haven’t. See it sometime. Its lower portion is built using the remains of many different Hindu temples. Its second floor has a stone inscription written in Sanskrit. No. We didn’t write that inscription. It was written for some other temple. They have just used that stone to build the wall. And go see the mosque in Chaukhamba Mohalla. With twenty-four pillars, it looks magnificent! You must see these places. Oh wait! Many others come to mind. The cemetery built in the honour of Makdoom Sahibat Gulzar Mohalla. The large rooms to its west and north are all built using pillars of destroyed Hindu temples….’

His grasp over actual facts and dates was stunning. He went on with his

recitation of dates and names of dynasties and sultans who had destroyed Hindu temples and replaced them with mosques. He even narrated the names of the destroyed temples from a time as far back as Balban, Khalji, Tughlaq, Sikandar Lodi…but then, he was the formidable Hamdullah Sahib. There was no chance that I could remember even a fraction of this overwhelming amount of information. His memory was phenomenal and it perfectly served his esteemed position as the keeper of historical records. It didn't take a lot of intelligence for me to understand that Hamdullah Sahib knew more and had more insight than that Bhatt who had shown me the temples. I phrased my question delicately, 'What I don't understand is despite repeated and large-scale destruction, why are there so many temples in Kashi even now?'

'So that's the thing! Our people have the best facilities. They pay paltry tax and they get maximum encouragement but no matter what, they can't match these banias, these…these…Hindu businessmen. Our men are trained to fight and they fight expertly. At other times, they pillage and loot and enjoy with women…you've seen how it is…anyway, these banias pay enormous amounts of tax but they somehow don't waste a single coin and over time they multiply their money. This happens even when business is completely forbidden for non-Muslims. Our businessmen take the business under their own names but cut a deal with the banias. The banias pay them some part of the profit but run the actual business. And, as usual, our men drown themselves in wine and lose themselves in the arms of women. This is the fate of people who are trained exclusively for the military. But see, if you don't have a military consisting largely of our own men, you can't maintain the empire. But the empire also needs money to function smoothly. This is where we are still weak. And these dastardly banias refuse to give up their gods. They bribe the local Muslim officers and in this way, the Shahenshah's orders are not completely enforced. A land ruled by our faith must not have non-Islamic places of worship. If they exist, they must be demolished or at the least, they must not be renovated and building new ones must definitely be forbidden. None of this happens in this Benares. From the beginning, even the badshahs in Delhi didn't really pay much attention to this. They cared mostly for the tax money that they expected from the subas. And the subedaars blindly believed the reports they got from the kotwal of Benares. But *now*, with Alamgir Aurangzeb Badshah—powerful, competent, shrewd and unswerving in his faith in Islam—in command of the Mughal Empire, just see how his merciful rule will seal the smallest hole that leads to bribes

and filthy and corrupt practices!'

'Who built the present Vishwanath temple?'

'There was a king named Todarmal in Benares. His son, Govardhan, built it. A Brahmin named Narayana Bhatt told him that Todarmal would attain Eternal Bliss if he would rebuild the temple in his father's name. So there. Again, the inspiration for all such sinful deeds is always the Brahmins. You know Brahmins…they're the mullahs of the Hindus…' suddenly he realized the import of his words and tried to correct himself '…no no…they are the originators of sinful beliefs. Remember this: killing one Brahmin earns you merit equal to killing ten Hindus…what was I saying? Oh? Akbar. Yes. It was built in Akbar's time. He had a law that prohibited using government money to build temples but he allowed people to use their own money to build whatever they wanted. Scoundrel. Sinner. I know his life is still roasting in terrible hellfire! Remember, he died in Al Hijra 1015. Now it is 1079. You calculate. He's burning for the last sixty-four years. And he will continue to burn forever!'

His face showed a glimpse of that fire, a first for me who had seen him always wearing a pleasant, smiling countenance.

Neither of us spoke at dinner. Before we got ready for bed, I asked him, 'Why did the Merciful Alamgir Badshah select Kashi to begin his destruction of Hindu temples?'

'Isn't the answer evident? Isn't Kashi the hub of the kafirs?' He paused, looked up sideways and then, 'there's another reason, I think. It seems there's something called Bhakti Panth, which began three hundred years ago and it's only growing stronger in this city. Somebody named Ramananda. And Kabir. And Vallabha after him. And Tulsidas after him, a poet. They are telling people that mantras are not necessary. All that matters is Bhakti, pure devotion. We could have let them go if it was just this. But no, kafirs are kafirs! These fellows also say that their god and our god are the same. What does this mean! They're saying their god is equal to Allah! Isn't that infernal? Doesn't the crime of merely suggesting that there actually is a god equal to Allah deserve death by chopping the throat off? Oh, and this Kabir! He is one of our own. A Muslim. It seems he is a staunch devotee of Ram. And he boldly preaches that Ram and Rahim are just two different names of the same god. Being born a Muslim and taking the name of another god is enough to cut his head but this fellow compounds his sin by equating Allah with their gods—how many times should we cut his head? And if this is happening in a

land under Muslim control, think what it means. Think, how much bribe the vile Muslim officers have eaten from the banias! Alamgir Badshah knows this very well, which is why he has decided to first cleanse Benares of this filth, bless his unwavering faith! I know how the mind of such people works. Take it from me today and now! A massive palace made completely of gold is already being built for the Alamgir in heaven.'

I began to calculate the hundreds of thousands of kilograms of gold necessary to build such a palace but I didn't know the dimensions of the palace, the number of rooms. I thought of asking Hamdullah Sahib but he had already fallen asleep.

Two days later, every gully and street was full of sword-wielding soldiers on horseback. The steps of the ghats were likewise lined with soldiers—nobody was allowed to bathe in the Ganga. Non-Muslims were not allowed to ride horses or possess weapons of any sort, a prohibition whose writ spawned the entire Mughal Empire. Anything that had the remotest possibility of becoming a weapon was proscribed. Hence, they set the drum-beater to announce that instruments like the axe to chop wood, sabre to cut shrubs, knives to cut vegetables had to remain inside the house until the official drum-beater announced again that they could be publicly carried. From this, I reckoned that Hindus somehow understood that this was the sign that a temple was about to be destroyed. They were weaponless. Even if they were armed, they lacked numbers to use those weapons. Political and military power was on the side of the temple-destroyers. Cries of 'Har Har Mahadev! Bam Bam Bolenath! Shivoham! Shivoham!' emanated from inside many houses. People let out cries and chants within the fear-filled walls of their homes. Others meditated. The soldiers on horseback broke open the doors of such houses and warned them against reciting kafir prayers or face the prospect of having their houses burnt. Very soon, the sound of prayer was, as it were, drowned in water. However, here and there, a rare Hindu dared to defy this and walked openly on the streets, his forehead covered with sacred ash, a wooden sickle in his hand, his lips fearlessly chanting 'Har Har Mahadev' as he made his way towards the Vishwanath temple. Barely ten steps, and a swift swoosh of the sword separated his head from his body in one precise stroke and splattered the street with blood. The soldier who did this deed rode onward like he had finished yet another routine task. The anguished cries of 'Haai!' that issued forth from within the frightened walls of the citizens' houses didn't dare cross their limits this time around.

Hamdullah Sahib and I were given special horses. We had a mask each bearing the Royal Seal to witness the security arrangements. We took a slow tour of the entire city observing the guards and everything that occurred around us.

'Sahib, when the law strictly forbids non-Muslims to carry weapons, to ride horses, is it still necessary to have such elaborate security?'

'Can we predict when a dog will bite? Remember, kafirs are treacherous people… Listen, I'll narrate an incident. It must've been about thirty-six or thirty-seven years ago. Our Merciful Alamgir Badshah's father, Shahjahan Badshah—although not equal to our alamgir—was a devout Muslim. His father, Jahangir Badshah, was devout but he had the vile blood of his father, that arch-infidel Akbar. He continued to allow Akbar's policies of allowing kafirs to build temples at their own cost. That's how new temples sprouted and flourished all over the empire. But when Shahjahan Badshah ascended the throne after Jahangir Badshah's death, he stopped this profane law and ordered the immediate destruction of all the newly-built temples and those temples that were partially completed. His *Badshahnama* records that this farmaan was passed in Al Hijra 1042. In Benares alone, seventy-six semi-completed temples were razed to the ground. But it was not easy. Haidar Baig was the subedaar of Allahabad. He despatched his younger brother's son to Benares to perform this holy deed. But a Hindu messenger lay in hiding somewhere on the way. He ambushed him and his four assistants and stabbed them all to death. But this wretch was no match for the army contingent that was following them. He was killed in no time. But do you see, child? The wretch killed our commander and four other men in certain knowledge that his death was assured. Doesn't this show the extent to which these kafirs believe in their dark faith? Anyway, so our soldiers hung his corpse on a roadside tree as a lesson for others. Now you see why the kotwal has made such extensive security arrangements?'

I had seen the Vishwanath mandir after the first day of arriving in Kashi. I visited it one more time to study it in depth knowing that it would stand there for another six or seven days. Its architecture was square, made of four shoulders. Each shoulder was about 125 feet large. Four inner houses each measuring 10 feet wide and 19 feet long flanked the sanctum sanctorum. After this, one could pass through another inner house, 8 feet wide and 12 feet long, to reach four pillared-halls. The eastern and western pillared-halls had a temple, each dedicated to Dandapani and the Dwarapalaka dieties. A

sub-temple stood in all the four corners of the Vishwanath temple. A pillared-hall enclosed a large stone idol of Nandi, which stood outside directly facing the temple. The temple was 128 feet tall with its tower measuring 64 feet in height. The towers on top of the four pillared-halls were each 48 feet high. It was really, a temple made of five pillared-halls. A pavilion measuring 125 feet long and 35 feet wide lay on the temple's eastern side. It was where the Hindus held their philosophical debates and discussions, and invited scholars to deliver discourses. I couldn't thank Bhatt enough. I would've been unable to find out this kind of detail on my own. The temple had a quadrangular pathway that made it convenient for devotees to circumambulate it and the pathway was dotted with mini-temples dedicated to countless gods and goddesses.

I had estimated that they would destroy the temple by blasting it with cannons from all four directions. When I arrived at the temple with Hamdullah Sahib, I noticed a group of people engaged in what appeared to be a mighty serious discussion. And it was. They were a group of Muslim architects speaking in pure Farsi. They were trying to reach an agreement on which walls should take the blow of the cannon and which walls and pillars to preserve. This discussion went on for a really long time until some kind of agreement was ultimately reached. The cannoneers were ordered to take aim. Nobody had spoken about the idol inside the temple. I suppose they had forgotten about it. The architects had given their verdict: the foundation, the major walls and the pillars were to be preserved. Why wreck them and then build a masjid afresh on this same spot when they could be reused? The entire site was surrounded by some five hundred soldiers on horseback, their swords drawn and ready. Minutes after the first two cannon blasts shattered the front wall, the sardar, the leader who was in charge of the operation yelled, 'The idol! The idol inside! There's an idol inside! Wait! Stop!' The artillerymen halted. Within seconds, the sardar and ten to twelve men rushed inside while the rest of us waited outside. He came out after sometime and declared that there was no idol, and that he could detect traces that the idol had been removed. The kotwal went inside and returned, nodding his head. This launched another flurry of discussion. They couldn't quite fathom what had happened. They consulted Hamdullah Sahib. Did that lingam idol really exist at all or had it already been demolished earlier? Were the priests worshipping just that empty spot? They could round up the cursed priests, tie them up and pry open their mouths with tongs and knives. But they had

vanished as if they had never been in Benares. In the end, they didn't find an answer that convinced them and so they debated on whether it really mattered if they found the idol or not. Finally, they decided it didn't. At most, they could use it as a stair of the mosque that would stand on this spot, so that the faithful would be reminded of the might of Islam. This anyway was the fate of all the idols in the smaller temples around the Vishwanath temple. One more idol wasn't that important. Not delaying the holy task on hand was more important. The sardar signalled to the artillerymen.

I suddenly felt sick in my stomach. Again. Second time today. I had discharged my bowels in the morning as usual and felt no discomfort before or after that. I had eaten the royal feast that the kotwal sent us every day—today it was that divine biryani and bowlfuls of fruit, cream, honey and milk—before mounting my horse. And then I'd been on another tour of the streets and gullies of Kashi before coming here to witness what was about to follow. Now the same sick feeling. I had to clear my bowels now and I told Hamdullah Sahib that I had to urgently go to the guest house to relieve myself.

'Go, but don't go alone. Take some guards with you. Who knows, these infidels cannot be trusted. They might throw some knife or something out of their windows and kill you. Actually, if all you want to do is go to the toilet, you can do that on the banks of the river. Sons of whores! They think that river is somehow holy. It'll teach them a lesson; also, you'll earn some merit.'

The flood had dwindled. I squatted on a step that wasn't slippery and didn't have wet and sticky soil. I was filled with the feeling ignited by Hamdullah Sahib's words—I was about to desecrate the place kafirs regarded as sacred. The agitated thrashing inside my stomach returned with even greater vigour but nothing came out. A few minutes later, I realized there was nothing inside that could come out. My head began to hurt. This had nothing to do with my stomach. I was disturbed. The agitation, I sensed, was in the mind. It blocked my thought and left me feeling something I didn't know how to comprehend. My knees began to hurt. I got up, fastened my drawstrings, turned around to face the river, walked a little and sat on a step. It was still raining up in the plains. The water was reddish and the force of its current remained much the same but its surface showed no trace of this force. An uninterrupted, unhurried, and quiet flow, a never-ending eddy that carried dried branches, wood and dead bodies of cows, goats, kids and humans.

Ganga, who had for ages borne countless deaths in her breast, who took everybody in her lap, who had had given food to countless subas, who seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of food and whose incredible force was submerged under her serene surface…suddenly it resurfaced…it took me back to that spot in front of the Vishnu temple, which I had failed to protect in Devagarh and had, instead, stood quivering before that giant of a general. It took me to that split second where I'd lost the courage to kill myself and was forced out of my faith. It took me to that stable where my masculinity was smashed. From Vishnu to Vishwanath. Vishwanath, meaning 'Lord of the World'. The Lord of the World, powerless to protect his own temple, how could he protect the whole world? Something was wrong somewhere. The sound of the explosions that I heard behind me intensified the sickness I felt in my stomach. This sickness coursed upwards to my chest and spread to my throat, nose and head and pervaded my entire body with every boom that issued from those monster cannons. I couldn't get myself to return to the temple. I stood up and continued to watch the formless river that flowed without undulations. Suddenly, Ganga appeared to me to be the iconoclastic force.

I didn't know what to do and began to walk forward. I spotted a sadhu sitting on the far end of a step facing the river. He had white, matted hair and the only clothing he wore was a soiled cloth, a little larger than the loincloth. Long years of exposure to the elements had turned his skin charcoal black. His form became clearer in the hot sun that emerges in the middle of the rainy season. At first I thought he was meditating or simply watching the river. I decided to find out and went closer. Perhaps it was the sound of my footfall or my shadow; he turned and looked at me. That took me by surprise and I found myself somehow forced to talk to him, but didn't know what to say. Perhaps because the events of the last few hours had so fully occupied my mind, I decided that that was a good topic for conversation.

'I'm sure you've heard the sounds coming from there.' I pointed. 'We are wrecking your Vishwanath temple and you're sitting here calmly like nothing has happened.'

He smiled gently, 'You've accomplished your goal. May the Lord do good to you.'

This threw me off… *confused* was closer to the truth. Was this destruction my goal? But it was with the intent of witnessing the Vishwanath mandir demolition, to reaffirm my faith in mighty Islam that I had beseeched the

good offices of Hamdullah Sahib and the graces of the badshah's favourite begum to be here. His remark sounded untrue, unjust even. I didn't intend to demolish…well, at least he was wrong that I personally had something to do with this temple destruction. I thought of clarifying this but then his words weren't entirely false either. And I found it difficult to form a proper response. I looked at his eyes and suddenly realized that his eyes were focused on me for a long time, as though he was visually prying me open. I figured he must have discovered something and this gave me a strange sense of confidence. I thought I'd found some logical basis to respond.

'It's not my goal. It's the goal of the badshah who lords over the whole of Hindustan. The badshah is merely implementing the Will of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe who has despatched the badshah to this earth to rule Hindustan. But I have a question for you.' I looked at him. 'This God you call Vishwanath. His name means Lord of the World. What kind of a lord is he who cannot protect a temple built in his own honour? He is therefore a false god. And he is not alone—there are hundreds of thousands of such false gods in Hindustan. Which is why our badshah's goal is to destroy these false gods and establish the power of the Only True God.' I spoke excitedly, almost with a fury. 'And by doing this, the badshah ultimately wants to put an end to ignorance and dark beliefs—the worship of multiple gods is the manifestation of ignorance. The badshah wants to permanently lay down the holy practice of worshipping the Only True God!'

'Sit down,' the sadhu said pointing to a place beside him. 'You must not be standing when we're discussing important matters like this.' I sat down, relieved to rest my aching legs. I had only been standing since morning. 'Where are you from? What do your parents do?' he asked me, like an elderly man asks a young one, in a tone of almost condescension. How could I tell him I was from Devagarh, that my father was King Jagaveer Simha…but who was he to ask me such questions? I thought about it. It was a common custom to ask exactly such questions when you met a new person. And this custom existed even among Muslims. Indeed, it was more prevalent among us. The suffix *bin*, which followed the first name, was mandatory if your first name was to carry any legitimacy, and the name that followed *bin* indicated whose son you were. I guessed this was what he was asking me. He broke my thoughts with, 'I can sense why you're feeling uncomfortable, so let me tell you who you are. You're from Rajaputana. You were captured in battle and your manhood was smashed and you were admitted to the service of the

zenana. Am I right?'

I trembled slightly. Sweat drops broke out on my body. *Who was he?* Surely, he was a siddha, a sage, an enlightened guru who knew the art of telling a stranger's life story by just looking at his face. I felt like prostrating before him, but I was still quivering and so I sat there trying to still myself. 'I know your opinion about me is changing fast. You're now feeling a little afraid of me, a person who you thought just a few moments ago was a wandering beggar–sadhu dressed in rags. I'll tell you the truth. I don't know any magic. I have no special powers. I have travelled most of Hindustan and I get my food by begging. I've seen most of the holy places—the destroyed pilgrimage spots as well as those that still remain untouched. I've observed the differences in body type, height, build, personality and facial features of people belonging to different regions. Your face clearly shows that you're from Rajputana. I notice that you're well-fed and healthy but your face is lacklustre and shows the same bizarreness of expression similar to men whose masculinity has been broken. And the colour of your skin tells me that you've been protected from the sun for many years, which is how I concluded that you must be serving in a zenana. Is my guess correct?'

I felt like a patient being subjected to a thorough, naked examination by an expert physician. How could such a patient even summon the courage to criticize or question the analysis of this extraordinary doctor? I was convinced that this man knew the very core of things like law, morals and God. When I spoke, my tone was supremely humble. 'Maharaj, Islam has only one god but Hindus have thousands. That's why Muslims are united and that's also why Hindus are divided among themselves. Isn't it true that they have lost their kingdoms everywhere, and Islam is triumphant all over Hindustan?'

'Have you heard of Ganesh-worshippers inviting Muslims to kill Vishnu-worshippers? Or Parvati-worshippers doing the same to the devotees of Lakshmi?'

I couldn't recall any such episode and shook my head but pressed on, 'But…but isn't it true that temple after temple is falling in the face of Allah's might? Doesn't this prove that Allah is more powerful?'

'Their conception of God is wrong. And we're accepting their faulty conception only because we're losing battle after battle. Your question stands on the same reasoning. We create our gods based on the stage of development we are at in matters of ethics, morals and spirituality. Allah is a

jealous god. He casts into everlasting Hell anybody who worships another god. Doesn't this mean that the man who created such a god was endowed with the same jealous spirit? And what kind of a faith is it that claims itself to be the only truth and allows no accommodation to any other that thinks differently? It is a faith driven by desire, greed, anger, pride, attachment and covetousness. Attaining victory in a war by employing unfair tactics and then attributing such victory as proof of the superiority of their faith…is this spiritually acceptable?'

I was completely stumped. I hadn't imagined that it was even possible to think about these things in this fashion. I saw him gazing at me, waiting for me to say something. Some minutes later, he said, 'We believe that spirituality is the basis of faith. They don't have the concept of spirituality. We believe that every man must grow, evolve, mature, and purify himself from the inside. It's a slow, gradual, ceaseless, and lifelong process. Non-violence, truth, non-covetousness, celibacy, non-acceptance, purity, joy, penance, self-study…have you heard of these?'

'Yes. When I was very young. Now, their meanings are hazy.'

'Anybody who hasn't purified himself first by observing these practices is not qualified to talk about God. Like I said, this is a continuous process and it is by such constant and unswerving practice that one grows spiritually. Every stage of such growth brings a different conception of God to your mind . And so, God simply represents the ethical state or the state of spiritual attainment of the person who has conceived that god. Now you tell me, what's the level of spiritual evolution of someone who says that the god he has created is a jealous god who commands you to destroy the gods of other people?'

This flew over my head. I could barely understand his words. I looked at his face blankly. He understood that I hadn't understood, and said, 'See, I believed that the essence of all religions is the same, the language in which the rishis, the seers preach it is different. Some talk about it in positive terms while others, in negative terms: some call it "Asampragnata Samadhi" while others call it "Pragna"; some ask us to always adhere to truth while yet others ask us to abstain from untruth. Some preach about the means of achieving happiness, and some tell us how to prevent misery. But they're all saying the same thing: living a virtuous life. The Vedantins, Yogis, Jains, Buddhists…I saw them as preaching the same thing but using different terminology. Differences were merely in name and form. I toured the whole of Hindustan and sought many learned gurus and scholars and discussed these things with

them. Once I met a maulvi sahib. I had heard that he was unwilling to enter into debates with non-Muslims. He believed that his faith was supreme and besides, it was also the Last Commandment that God Himself had sent and so there was no question of granting even a second place to any other faith. When I met him, he narrated an incident about the Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). He said that God sent many messages to him through his angel, Gabriel, and that the collection of these messages is called Koran, and that the narrations concerning the words and deeds of the Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) are called Hadis. These narrations were written down in order for the faithful to model their lives and conduct upon those of the Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). And so Koran is the Heard Revelations while Hadis are Revelations in action and they complement one another. Which is why the life and deeds of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) are as important as the Koran. The Koran must be understood in the light of the Hadis. Is my understanding correct?'

'As far as I know, yes.'

'Here is the incident that the maulvi sahib told me: the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was eager to convert all the tribes in Arabia into his fold. One such was a Jewish tribe named Banu Qurayza. They were fiercely attached to their faith and it was impossible to get them to convert like other tribes. And Jews were excellent businessmen. They were shrewd and wealthy and they commanded wide-reaching influence. They were deeply religious and knew the Torah very well and they lived by its tenets. It seems Torah is also called the Old Testament, from which the Christians incorporated lots of teachings into their Holy Book, the Bible. The Koran came many many years after the Bible. And the Jews were well-respected because they were the people of the Oldest Book. It seems the Torah contains a prediction that a prophet will descend to the earth in future. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) thought that his new faith would be accepted throughout Arabia if he succeeded in getting the Jews to proclaim that he was that prophet promised in the Torah. He sent for the leaders of Banu Qurayza. They refused to recognize him as the promised prophet but they didn't stop at that. They made secret pacts with other tribes who didn't accept his prophet-hood and began a series of instigations against him. The prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) decided to teach them a lesson. He entered into a secret treaty with two Arab tribes that were on the side of Banu Qurayza and managed to besiege the fort of the Jews. After many days, the Jews gave up their fort and surrendered and begged the

mercy of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). What happened next is important in light of your question. The soldiers of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) entered the fort and then came out with seven hundred Jews. The hands of the prisoners were twisted around and bound behind their backs. About 1,200 women and children were rounded up separately and pushed around like cattle. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) addressed the leader of the tribe: 'You must definitely be punished. I will give you a choice. I'll select one of your own and make him the judge. He will decide the punishment. His words will be final. Do you accept?' They thought this was a good idea. One of their own would be lenient towards them. So they agreed. Now, the Jews had their share of infighting. Just some days ago, Sa'ad, a Jew, had waged war against Banu Qurayza, lost badly, was grievously wounded and had somehow managed to escape alive. The wounds inflicted by the arrows were still fresh. A female attendant of the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was deputed to serve him. He sent for Sa'ad, who arrived riding a donkey. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) addressed him, "You must pronounce the punishment these people deserve." The prisoners loudly begged for mercy. Sa'ad's pronouncement was clear and final: the men were to be beheaded and their property was to be divided among the victorious. Women and children were to be sold as slaves. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) approved and prayed to Allah to grant Sa'ad a high place in heaven. The women and children were herded to the city. That night, the prisoners were left on the vast field. Then they were offered a choice to convert to Islam and declare that Mohammad (*sallallahu alaiyhi wassallam*) was the promised prophet and save their lives. But the prisoners didn't fear for their lives. They agreed to die than abandon their age-old faith. And so, the seven hundred of them spent the night reciting from the Book, giving each other strength and comfort. Meanwhile, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) ordered his men to dig deep trenches in the middle of the city. In the morning, the prisoners were brought in batches of five or six and made to stand facing the trench. One man would chop the head off so that it landed in the trench and another would push the headless body. This murderous frenzy continued throughout the day till it was time to light the evening lanterns, and it finally ended in a heap of seven hundred heads and bodies with blood flowing like a stream. The soldiers that participated in the siege divided the women and children among themselves. Rihana, a twenty-two-year-old woman, was the most beautiful. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) selected her and offered to

marry her. But she refused to give up her faith and so he kept her as his concubine. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) laid down that one-fifth of the spoils of war should go to him and the rest were to be divided between the soldiers. The women and children who remained after the division was complete were bartered for war horses and weapons. You know that in Islam one-fifth of the spoils of battle go towards the income of the state? This rule originated from this episode in the Prophet's (Peace Be Upon Him) life. Have you heard this episode?'

I nodded. I had. From Hamdullah Sahib's mouth. In a state of respect mixed with fear.

'So what lesson does this episode teach you?' the sadhu asked.

This time he gazed at my face more intensely like he was determined to extract *some* response from me. I blurted, unable to bear his blazing stare, 'Everything that the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) does is inspired by God, right? Why didn't the Jews accept the Prophet's (Peace Be Upon Him) prophet-hood?' This was a desperate answer and even as I said it, I knew it was not mine. Only my tongue spoke it but the words were Hamdullah Sahib's…the same words, when he narrated this event to me.

'Every man—saint, sadhu, prophet…whatever the garb—who speaks about his actions being directed by the voice of God is simply evading responsibility for his actions. Remember I told you that we create our gods based on which stage of development we are with respect to ethics, morals and spirituality? A commandment to worship only my god and no other is the highest form of egotism. Worshipping only one god also means that you worship the god I ask you to worship. Isn't that so? Will they agree to worship the gods of other people and willingly give up theirs? Can they treat with love those people who don't accept that God exists? Let me tell you, true spirituality doesn't need God. Someone who doesn't believe in God can still be spiritual. And to be truly spiritual, a person must cultivate the qualities of compassion, non-violence—in thought, word and deed—and celibacy, because unless you've defeated desire, you cannot defeat violence.'

'Maharaj, are you saying that it is wrong to impose your religion on somebody you've defeated in war?'

'Have you heard of a scripture called *Yagnavalkya Smriti*?'

'No, maharaj.'

'A verse from that says: if a king conquers another land, he must ensure that the family and social traditions of the conquered kingdom are preserved

intact, as before, and are not tampered with. This is the message of our ancient sages. Have you heard of poet Kalidasa's epic poem, "Raghuvamsham"?'

'No, maharaj.'

'The poet describes the king Raghu as being a Dharmavijayi. Hundreds of years ago, a Kashmir scholar named Vallabhadeva classified kings into three categories. The first was Dharmavijayi, a king who, after defeating his enemy, allowed him to rule the territory as before but exerted administrative control over him. The second was Lobhavijayi, a king who, after defeating his enemy, snatched both his territory and treasury but spared the defeated king's life. A king who after defeating his enemy not only snatched his territory and wealth but put him to death was called an Asuravijayi king… have you heard of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*?'

'I have. Scholars in my Respected Father's court used to quote from it quite frequently. My teacher Shivapada Bhatt told me that he'd give me lessons in *Arthashastra* after my battle training was complete.'

'I'll tell you what it says about how defeated kings should be treated. It's very detailed, so I'll tell you just some of the important verses. If a king dies in battle, his wife, children, family, relatives and his wealth must not be taken as war spoils. People of all classes of the conquered kingdom must be left untouched and what's more, must be further strengthened. The dead king's son must be installed as the successor. This secures the loyalty of not only the son but the successive generations to the victorious king who treated his defeated rival with respect. Another verse describes how a victorious king must conduct himself: he must respect, preserve and himself cultivate the traditions, dress, manners and food habits of the defeated people. He must encourage high culture, learning and scholarship, and give generous land grants to people who have already achieved excellence in various fields. I can go on but the essence is that a triumphant king should respect and preserve the culture and traditions of the lands he has conquered. Our faith has prescribed this as a duty to kings.'

'Maharaj, is it wrong to impose your religion on somebody you've defeated in war?' I persisted.

'Setting out with a definite intent to defeat someone is in itself a product of a mind that's not yet evolved. We call it a product of tamas, a quality of human nature characterized by sloth, irresponsibility, betrayal and insensitivity. It ultimately leads to death and destruction. Wars happen but

how acceptable is it to loot, enslave and kill the vanquished even after the war is over? We believe that just as our soul is but a spark of the Universal Soul, so is that of the enemies. Then what's the point of enslaving others? Bharat, what you call Hindustan, witnessed several wars centuries before these people came, but not one king forcibly imposed his faith upon a conquered people.'

I had heard this and similar verses in a life before this life as a slave. I had been taught parts of the Bhagavad Gita and now recalled, hazily, the things I had learnt—that though people have their individual souls, it is but the same Universal Soul inhabiting different bodies. This meant that even plants, insects, and animals had souls. Human nature comprised three gunas or fundamental tendencies—sattva, rajas and tamas. But now I couldn't recall what they really meant. I marvelled at this sadhu's brilliant sweep of knowledge and his razor-like precise explanations for almost everything…so did the Prophet's (Peace Be Upon Him) deeds set the model for the raiders, nawabs and sultans who came later in time? It appeared as if the conversation had ended. We sat in silence, looking at each other. And suddenly, something flashed in my mind. I said, 'So what are you doing? I mean, these people are running around the country destroying temples, smashing idols, killing Hindus, torturing their priests, and selling hundreds of thousands as slaves… what are you doing?'

'Hmm…what am I doing? What I am doing is what thousands of people like me—sadhus, sanyasins, bairagis—are doing. We go around the country, everywhere from the cities to remote villages, and tell our people not to lose heart because we're facing very hard times. We comfort them and ask them not to abandon the faith of our forefathers. We give them the example of Shivaji Maharaj. We tell them that he was the disciple of Ramadas who was a sadhu like us. We tell them that others like him will be born or will eventually rise up and become powerful. The wheel of time doesn't remain at the same place for long.'

'Is he still alive? Shivaji?'

'He's not only alive, he has safely reached his fort and now he's recapturing, one after the other, the forts he had lost. I think, in time, Bharat will be free of this curse.' He turned his gaze behind him as he said these words. The sound of footfall grew louder. I turned around and saw a soldier walking towards me, sword fully drawn. He asked me roughly in the singular, 'Which place are you from?'

‘Delhi.’

‘You came with the badshah’s courier?’

‘Yes.’

‘That means you came here to relieve yourself. Hamdullah Sahib is anxious. He sent for you. You must come with us now.’ This time, he addressed me in the plural. I left immediately. It was unsafe to talk to this sadhu in his presence.

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Hamdullah Sahib was a meticulous record-keeper. He noted down even seemingly minor events and sights and details of everyday life here. He dictated, I wrote. The actual writing of the history of the demolition of the Vishwanath temple began a day after the cannons blasted the walls.

‘That kotwal will do his duty of sending reports of the demolition. But what do the lowly clerks who write these reports know of the fine art of recording the kind of details I do? Their language is crude, has none of the elegance of the pristine Farsi in which I write! Alamgir Badshah will grant me a massive jagir just reading my description of the demolition! But you see my tragedy, child? The bloody courtiers will never allow my hard work to pass through and reach the badshah’s eyes.’ He emitted a long sigh before continuing, ‘But I have done this as my sacred duty. Whatever reward Allah gives me is enough for me,’ he said in a tone of self-consolation.

I replied, ‘Kafirs say that God can be worshipped by anybody in any form they choose. However, the wise say that idol worship is a filthy practice and that’s why we must destroy all idol-temples. Was this the word of the Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) himself?’

‘Not merely his word but his deed. He has shown the truth of this wisdom over and over several times during his holy lifetime. Al, Al-lat, Manaat, Al-Uzhu, Shams, Dhu, Sh-Shara, At-Thuraiya, Khu’zu, Wa’ad, Ruda, Zad, Manaaf, Yagut…all these gods had idols. Idol-temples were built for them. The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) burnt them down and defeated them completely and established the supremacy of the Only True God, Allah and laid the path for the faithful. The nawabs and sultans that ruled Hindustan followed this holy dictum and destroyed the symbols of darkness and now, under Aurangzeb Badshah, this stricture is being followed with the thorough sanctity it demands. Learn something from this!’

That sealed it because the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) had himself laid down the precedent, and one did not judge the Prophet's (Peace Be Upon Him) word. Yet, the sadhu's words came to mind. 'Anybody who hasn't purified himself first by observing the practices of truth, continence, non-stealing…is not qualified to talk about God…this is a continuous process and it is by such constant and unswerving practice that one grows in spirituality.' I was confused but I had neither the courage nor the freedom to talk about this with Hamdullah Sahib. I wanted to meet the sadhu again but it was already night and the whole city was under curfew. I couldn't risk going out alone. I decided to see him tomorrow. Sleep eluded me for a very long time.

He was not there when I went to the riverside the next morning—there was nobody there. The Ganga flowed seemingly oblivious to the momentous happenings in Kashi. It seemed that her flow had a sweep that ingested the nuances of the thousands of traditions at Kashi, which she showed the world as she flowed on. I thought I had discovered an unexpected and important insight, but I didn't understand what it meant.

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We received our travel permits together with the response to Alamgir Badshah's farmaan. These were neatly rolled and placed inside a bamboo reed, reinforced with wooden covering and sealed with wax and placed inside a cloth-bag, which was stitched to the teeth and sealed again with wax. It was time to leave for Delhi. Hamdullah Sahib was honoured with an expensive shawl and I got a new kurta as a gift. The kotwal whose name was Nayab personally came to see us off. We could easily guess the contents of the letter secured inside the bamboo reed. Even with minimal experience, the couriers, Khadar Khan and Imitiyaz Khan, knew it was pretty much an open secret. We ate a steaming hot—and delicious—dinner when we stopped at the highway rest house that night. Then we offered our namaz and slept. I overheard the conversation between the couriers. 'I'm certain I have earned my share of merit in that temple destruction. I may not get a palace for myself in jannat but I know I'll get a massive marble mansion!' Imitiyaz Khan said with obvious confidence.

'What do you know about heaven? It's not for people who take salary and deliver farmaans. Learn something!' Kadhar Khan instantly chided him. He was a black-skinned Muslim from Hindustan but he was quite learned in

Islam. Imitiyaz was a Hindustani Muslim too, but like Kadhar Khan, he couldn't tell when his ancestors had converted to the Only True Faith. At any rate, neither told me the complete truth about their ancestry when I had engaged them in conversation during our onward journey to Benares. I didn't want to press them—they either really didn't know or were unwilling to tell the tale of their lineage. But I did notice how both of them repeatedly insisted that they were descended from the Arab country, but they couldn't speak Farsi or Arabic at all. They spoke Hindustani, the curious mixture of Arabic and Farsi, which was the common tongue of the military. Although the highest officers of the military were proficient in pure Farsi, the administrative language of the Mughal Empire, they were equally well-versed in Hindustani. But between themselves, they didn't, even in error, use the loathsome Hindustani. Alamgir Badshah, too, it seems, knew Hindustani. But he had learned it in the interest of political prudence—you could have a tighter control over your subordinates if you conversed with them in their own tongue, a fact that Hamdullah Sahib told me.

Now Imitiyaz's pride was wounded. He retorted, 'So are you saying that if we hadn't delivered the farmaan the temple would've still been destroyed?'

'No no no. It's not that. Only he attains heaven who dies in jihad…in a war waged to spread the Only True Faith… do you know what's there in heaven?'

'You're the learned one. You tell me,' Imtiyaaz now said in a subdued tone.

'I'm happy. I'll tell you. Heaven, jannat, is where you have an unending supply of milk and honey. Heaven is where you have large, flowered and perfumed gardens that are always pleasant—it doesn't burn in summer or freeze in winter. Horses made of rubies take you anywhere you want, any time you want. Soft cushions are spread everywhere for you to recline. And the bashful, dark-eyed virgins…they are as chaste as the sheltered eggs of oysters and their eyes are always half-closed and they have full, round breasts. They are called houries. They are eternal virgins and they will serve you, and no matter how many times you have enjoyed them, their vaginas will always remain chaste. Their bodies are transparent so you can see their bones, which are like the soft thin lines inside a pearl. They resemble the pure red wine in a white goblet. Their skin is marble-white and they suffer from none of the things that ordinary women suffer here on this earth. They neither menstruate nor go through menopause. They don't carry children in their

womb. They don’t urinate and defecate. And you know why their eyes are always half open?’

Imitiyaz said no.

‘Because they’re bashful, because they don’t look at a man other than you and because they are in your eternal debt because you married them. Their bodies always exude a sweet smell and they’re free from any dirty odour. They’re young forever. They grow up in pure luxury. Why! A hourie is the symbol of luxury! Her form is intoxicating. Her large, round breasts don’t sag ever; they’re full and ripe and unblemished. She has but to look in the direction of this earth and there’ll be light and fragrance everywhere. She’s more reflective than a mirror—anybody can see their reflection in her cheeks. Every man who enters heaven will be given seventy-two houries. Think what that means! He will become thirty-two years old the moment he steps into heaven, no matter how old he was on this earth, and his age will remain thirty-two years forever. And it’s not just that. He will be endowed with the virility of a hundred men! He will be given a diamond-studded palace and he’ll have eighty thousand slaves. Do you understand?’

Imitiyaz didn’t reply. He didn’t say anything even after a long time.

After sometime, I heard the sound of Hamdullah Sahib getting up. I could faintly see him grope around and then feel and touch the walls as he made his way towards the door. I sat up. He stepped out and headed towards the couriers. In a moment, I heard his voice, ‘Khadar, whatever you’ve said till now is correct. But remember, whatever you say in the matters of faith, be sure to say the name of the Holy Book it was taken from, and be sure to say the chapter.’

‘Khan Sahib, I’m not as learned as your exalted self. I have read the Holy Book in translation in the military…Hindustani tongue. I have read a little but I read every day. There are so many suras and verses, I don’t remember all their names and numbers. But you have told me that I have learnt it correctly. That means Allah’s mercy is on me.’

‘Good.’

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On the afternoon of the third day of our journey, we had to halt abruptly on the highway. About five or six hundred people—men and women, old and young, and children of various ages—were running amok. Almost all of them

except the children were carrying pots, utensils and sacks of groceries on their shoulders and heads. Several women had plastered their babies around their waist and had hoisted a cloth bag atop their head. What was also quite apparent was that they were villagers—stick-thin bodies from being underfed since birth, sun-charred skin and unkempt hair that hadn't seen a drop of oil. The men wore only a large wisp of cloth to cover their private parts. Skin peeped out of the holes in the women's blouses and on some women the naked expanse above their breasts and on their back was visible. In no time, we saw a large cloud of dust followed by about twenty armed soldiers on horseback that encircled them. The group that was fleeing halted in the same fright that had motivated its flight. Looking at them, I thought they anyway didn't have a good chance to flee forever. They would've eventually stopped. They were catching their breath in quick, loud gasps. Babies began to wail loudly. Children began to cry. The four of us approached the soldiers, who, seeing our dress, said 'Salaam Aleikum'. We returned their greeting and asked what the matter was.

'They're a bunch of sooars! Dirty pigs were running away without paying tax! We hunted them down the moment we got to know of this! Bastards would've escaped!' said a soldier, almost screaming.

An old man from the group said, 'But we have paid the tax and now they are asking another unjust tax upon it.'

'Sooar! How dare you call jaziya an unjust tax! Convert to Islam if don't want to pay jaziya. The badshah is merciful. He has issued a farmaan to exempt those who convert from paying even the land tax. Convert, and your land and cattle will remain with you,' he roared.

'Yes. He's right. Convert, all of you. It'll be good for you,' four more soldiers said in chorus.

But the old man was spirited. 'Who are you to order us to leave our god? If you think your god is the greatest, he is, only for you. The next time you abuse our god, here!' He opened his mouth wide, made a disgusting crackling noise and spat on the ground, emitting a loud 'tchthoo'.

The soldiers immediately huddled close and began to confer about the exact punishment this abomination deserved. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Imitiyaz sped forward like an unexpected gust into the crowd of helpless, frightened people, swooshed his sword horizontally in the direction of the old man's shoulder and in one motion, delivered a chop that cut the neck by half. Blood spurted like a fountain. A feeble 'Ram! Ram!' issued from the old

man’s mouth as he slumped on the ground and died. A loud group-wail was heard and then the group ran berserk again, despite the soldiers who were guarding them like hawks. The soldiers had made a strategic formation but their numbers were small and they didn’t know what to do when five hundred-odd people ran like they were possessed. They managed to catch a few but the majority of them escaped. ‘Sooar! Swine! How far will they flee? Our army will hunt them down like flies. They have no idea of our badshah’s power!’ the chief of the band roared.

Meanwhile, Imitiyaz had emerged from the group with the bloody sword still drawn. Kadhar Khan said, ‘Collecting jaziya is not our job. Are you insane? Why did you do this? We’ve wasted enough time already. We still need to cover a lot of journey. The courier has to reach the badshah real soon.’

‘Didn’t you hear what that old swine said? If you think your god is the greatest, he is, only for you. The next time you abuse our god…didn’t you see how he spat? Which true Muslim can just stand listening to such wretched words without doing jihad on that infidel bastard? I’ve dispatched him to hell. Tell me now: don’t I get a place in heaven?’

Be it even a game, nobody other than the authorized officer could kill or order a killing. Anybody who disobeyed this law faced instant, severe punishment. But then, Imitiyaz said he had murdered someone who had uttered the gravest of insults—a kafir who had dared to reject the supremacy of our God. To this, Kadhar added that they were the official couriers who delivered the badshah’s farmaan to demolish the kafirs’ sacred idol-temples in Kashi and were now heading back to Delhi carrying the report of the temple demolition, which was successful. The chief of that band of soldiers was convinced with this explanation and let us go. We wanted to get away as quickly as possible and exerted our horses till we were completely out of their sight. Kadhar then manoeuvred the beast to a steady, comfortable pace.

I was feeling ill at ease and dizzy after I saw how Imitiyaz had cut that old man’s head. I touched my sword and resisted the temptation to move in from the side and chop off Imitiyaz’s head. This rage-filled contemplation filled my head for a long time and it took a lot of effort to extract myself out of it. What was the point? I could kill this wretch Imitiyaz but I knew I’d be caught and taken to Delhi, where they would surely cut my head. Killing Imitiyaz would accomplish nothing. But I couldn’t get the picture of that old man’s face out of my mind—lying dead on the ground, his half-cut throat…and then

his words: ‘If you think your God is the greatest, he is, only for you, not for us!’ I could sense how the rest of them would be hunted down sooner than later. I knew what would happen to them. Sold as slaves, the good-looking girls as sex slaves…it was the same story always. Shyamala! I didn’t see her again after that day. Perhaps I could have seen her. Suddenly I had an idea. I could beg the mercy of Udaipuri Mahal and convince her to take her as her servant. I liked the idea but there was little chance of that happening. A mother of three was of no use to anybody. Even if Udaipuri Mahal agreed, what was the point? I could get married to her. It had happened in many cases—servants married each other if they had the master’s permission, but my case would look ridiculous. A marriage in which the man had no manhood. Why, Shyamala herself would laugh at me. And my thoughts reverted to those villagers who had managed to escape. They knew fully well what awaited them if they were caught…their only choice was to go so deep into the forests and mountains that they put themselves completely beyond the reach of these soldiers. Then they’d live there for the rest of their lives hunting raw meat, plucking fruits, vegetables and leaves, and trying to protect their lives from wild animals every second. They would wear no proper clothes and their bodies would go all rough and weathered from unprotected exposure to rain and sun and cold. They’d live like animals…like…like…like Maharana Pratap and his loyal band of soldiers who fled into the forests to escape Akbar Badshah’s army.

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Udaipuri Mahal Sahiba asked me to narrate details of the Holy Deed I had witnessed. I was tempted to tell her it was the most dastardly deed done in God’s name. However, I knew the fate that awaited such a frank admission. So I described the destruction in brief. It was routine on her part as well—she had listened to hundreds of such accounts and wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about yet another one. ‘May the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) grant you a fine place in Heaven,’ she said in the end.

Some days later, a very excited Hamdullah Sahib said, ‘Have you heard? The badshah has issued a farmaan to demolish the Keshavaraya temple…the one in Mathura! And that’s not all. There’s more good news. His vassals in Rajaputana are challenging his authority by building new temples. He has drawn a plan to teach these scoundrels a solid lesson. You just wait and

watch; in the coming days a whole lot of temples will be razed down in Jodphur. And the temple right in front of the Udaipur palace will be brought down. Think what that will mean for that Rajput king! Also the three temples on the bank of the Udaisagar lake and some…no, wait…172 temples around Udaipur, sixty-three in Chittoor and sixty-six in Amber. This is the badshah's plan. I have no doubt how meticulously he will finish the task. If he sets his mind on something, he'll go after it with single-minded discipline and won't rest until he either converts or wipes out the last kafir in Hindustan! Mark my words, my child: Allah has already built him a grand—the grandest palace—in heaven.'

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Long years of experience told her that the professor had indeed come to chair the workshop. This one, like the others, had the standard markings—a large gathering, debate, immense opportunity to show off his oratory and the fact that others were paying for it. He typically stayed in one of those sprawling VIP guest houses. He needed that kind of space to address his fan following, to look at the stars they had in their eyes when he spoke, all of that. Invariably, only government or government-aided institutions could afford to build such massive guest houses. In this case, it meant the university guest house. She decided to visit him. And this university wasn't new to her. Many years ago, she had been here as a student, *his* star student under his guidance and leadership. The All India Progressive Students' Association, a union of sorts formed by the students of this university, had organized a seminar. The whole university playground was covered with shamiana. The professor's Marxist speeches on the timeless conflict that existed in India between castes and the horrible exploitation that went on in the garb of spirituality in the fields of art and music and so on. He spoke, thundered and roared from morning till evening and he knew no fatigue. This was the seminar that catapulted him into permanent stardom. She didn't miss any speech and internalized the fire that his words ignited. In the evening, she participated in plays and folk dances woven around these themes. It was organized by the Delhi-based Progressive theatre group called The Caucasian Chalk Circle. She didn't step into the city of Kashi even once. There was nothing there except the remnants of exploitation. Innumerable temples and bathing ghats—all built by squeezing the sweat and blood of poor people, by feeding them

the heady opium of spiritual deliverance.

‘Kashi is the surviving symbol of a rotten civilization.’ She recalled the closing line of Dr Ramswarup Yadav’s speech. She had asked him why he hadn’t changed his name if he hated his religion with such passion.

‘To remind myself of how foolish my parents were,’ was his response.

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‘That’s right. Professor Sastriji from Bangalore is here. Suite 2. He’s in the workshop right now. Social Science Block,’ the guest house manager told her. She thanked him and asked for directions and as she walked towards the Social Science Block, she noticed that all classrooms were empty. It was as if today was a holiday.

In a very large hall in the interiors of the Social Science Block she noticed a gathering of more than a hundred students. She watched the proceedings from the window. She hadn’t been invited to this seminar. She guessed that the three other men on the stage were the resource persons. Professor Sastri was seated on the middlemost chair, the chairperson, resplendent in his red kurta. The absence of facial hair and the prominent baldness bestowed a special revolutionary glow to his personality. She stood outside the hall and observed the proceedings through the window.

The question–answer session was in progress. Students raised their hands in turn and waited for the chairperson’s nod. A student was allowed to ask a question if the chairperson nodded yes, a procedure familiar to her. A young man asked, ‘Is there a special significance for holding this workshop in the Benares Hindu University?’

The resource person seated to the right, wearing an ash-coloured half-shirt and trousers, got up to respond.

‘I’ll answer this,’ Sastriji said. The other man sat down.

‘The answer is in your question. The full name of this university is Benares Hindu University established by that reactionary, Madan Mohan Malaviya, with funding from reactionary kings and Marwari businessmen and, fittingly, established in the ultimate reactionary hub of India—Kashi. It is also fitting that the arch-capitalist Birla built a large Vishwanath temple right in the middle of this university, an appropriate symbol of regressiveness. Isn’t it suitable then, that we must burn down the so-called Indian culture—that decayed, stinking mass of garbage—starting with this

place?'

'But this university is also renowned for its science, technology and medical departments,' the student persisted.

'Yes. We have no argument with those. But then the professors that teach these subjects hold the same regressive ethical and social views. It's our duty to reform them. A majority of students —and some professors—from these disciplines are in the audience, a live testimony to the success of this workshop.'

The hall exploded with applause. As it died down, a student stood up and raised his hand.

'Yes.' The professor nodded.

'In that case, the Aligarh Muslim University, quite close by, must equally stink. Why don't you organize a workshop there? Or is that your next destination, professor?'

This met with absolute silence. It was as if the audience was suddenly suspended. The professor bored into the young man with his glowering eyes, which it seemed had the power to induce guilt in the questioner. And then, 'Hahahaha! We have a reactionary here! See how this lad, when I spoke about the rot of our culture, points his accusatory fingers at our innocent minorities, our poor brothers! But he's not alone. There are millions like him…oh, and I'm sure you have a RSS background. Tell us the truth, because it's quite curious that despite attending *our* workshop, you still harbour such questions. Come on, tell us the truth! Has the RSS sent you to spy on us? None of us are afraid of you but you must understand a fundamental truth: *the majority is always fundamentalist*. The minorities, struggling as they are for mere survival, don't have time or resources or inclination for fundamentalism. A system that doesn't allow minorities to freely practice and nurture their faith has no business calling itself a democracy. Fundamentalism of the majority is the biggest threat to any nation. This is a timeless, universal truth that we must never forget!'

This time the explosion of applause came in torrents and the sweat that broke out on the student's face was evidence of his clear defeat.

Lakshmi wanted to barge into the hall and call the professor's bluff word-by-word with solid evidence, but she refrained. She was uninvited. And then, now, he was directly related to her. But after what she had heard, she was in no mood to meet him.

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And the story ended thus. *What could Khwaja Jahan do after he returned to Delhi? There was no way he could murder Aurangzeb getting past the bodyguards. I'm not writing fantasy fiction. Aurangzeb lived for thirty-eight years more after he demolished the Vishwanath temple. I can't let Khwaja Jahan kill him prematurely. I mean, it's silly to let Khwaja Jahan to do something that outlandish. There was no way he could reach Aurangzeb after breaking the formidable cordon of bodyguards…this isn't a work of daydreaming where I can write anything with a view to entertain…a historical work should express historical truths through the feelings, emotions of the characters it contains…I can't tamper with history. Or I can trash this whole novel and write dry history like Father had planned to. But even there, you can't put an abrupt stop to history at some random point that strikes your fancy. Logic. Flow of events, etc. Inflicting this kind of abruptness in historical fiction will ruin feeling. Tabassum…Shyamala Devi…needs some logical closure.*

These thoughts tortured Lakshmi for two full days. She was in Kashi for a little over two months now and had written the portion about the Vishwanath temple destruction. The rest house manager had done his bit. He allowed her to stay there for so long by registering her under different names and addresses, and he couldn't take this risk indefinitely. He spoke to people of the neighbouring rest house and had her shifted there.

There was nothing left for her to write. The events related to Kashi in the novel were complete, but her fascination with the history of this place continued to exert a compelling force. Now she spent her time in the university library, collecting material and making notes about the history of Kashi after Aurangzeb. She convinced the librarian that she was a research student. The librarian allowed her to read all she wanted. And then suddenly one day, something struck her. She made notes:

> Mohammad Ghazni's invasion forced all the scholars of western India… Sanskrit scholars of Punjab and Kashmir fled in large numbers and landed in Kashi and made it the only centre of scholarship and learning in north India. Aurangzeb didn't demolish just the Vishwanath temple. He destroyed all the centres of learning.

In a way it was sad. These scholars of Kashi still retained the memory of what Bhaktiar Khalji did to Nalanda, the biggest and the pre-eminent centre of educational and scholastic excellence. Bhaktiar Khalji had smashed that sprawling university and burnt its mammoth library and butchered the Buddhist gurus and bhikkus. Despite this, these scholars in Kashi went ahead and built massive educational centres. They were now ripe for Aurangzeb's picking. After he ruined them, these scholars imparted education to students in the fearful privacy of their own homes. This system continued over generations and in the twentieth century, Madan Mohan Malaviya worked tirelessly and managed to found a large university. And now, people like the professor want to destroy it by conducting workshops. Is it appropriate to call him the sentimental descendant of Aurangzeb?

Nothing of the original Kashi remains today. Temples, ghats and even graveyards that we see today were built by the Marathas. Without exception, every Maratha king, general and commander relentlessly fought to reclaim the temples and ghats destroyed by Muslims, who had replaced them with mosques. They used every craft, art and trick. But then, once a mosque was forcibly built on the site of a temple they had destroyed, it was over—no Muslim king ever agreed to give up such mosques and allow the Marathas to rebuild the temples. And then Benares fell into British hands. The Marathas entered into treaties advantageous to the British—they helped them with money and forces with the hope of reclaiming the original site of the Vishwanath temple. On their part, the British had quickly learned the route to their success in India—counterbalancing the Hindus and Muslims. They denied the Marathas their 'Kashi request'. All that the Maratha peshwa, Baji Rao I, wanted was to recover the Gyanvapi Masjid and rebuild the Vishwanath temple. But then Balaji Baji Rao (1740–61) was more ambitious. He decided to bring the whole of Kashi under his control. In 1742, he marched with a massive army till Mirzapur. Nawab Safdarjung learned of this and sped to Benares. He rounded up all the Brahmins there and issued them a warning that unless Balaji Baji Rao desisted from his foolish adventure, he would order the massacre of all Brahmins in Kashi. The frightened Brahmins sent a delegation to Balaji Baji Rao and the Maratha king went back. Nine hundred years ago, the Muslim marauders had threatened the

tough Hindu defenders in Moolasthan that they would destroy the Surya temple if they continued to fight them. The Hindu defenders had retreated. The same threat, the same principle was used to browbeat Balaji Baji Rao. Kashi's Brahmins knew of—and had presevered—the noble tradition of the thousands of Brahmins who had sacrificed their lives to uphold their faith. Yet, they turned out to be cowards. What was the root of this cowardice? In a way, the objective of the Muslim kings was accomplished—the Brahmins had internalized timidity.

In a letter dated 23 February 1759 to the Scindia's Diwan Ramji Anant, Balaji Baji Rao wrote, 'We must decide on a couple of important matters with Shuja-ud-Daulah. Try and take Benares, Ayodhya and Allahabad from him. He had given word to my father (in 1757) to hand over Ayodhya and Benares. I'm still in talks with him over Allahabad. If he agrees over this without much fuss, take it without delay. [Yadi, et al., *Historical Padre*, pp 166]'.

But Shuja-ud-Daulah's mind was filled with different calculations. Outwardly, he cordially agreed to hand over Ayodhya and Benares but he had the firm assurance of the vazir in Delhi who told him that returning lands after it was won was equal to backstabbing Islam.

With the sole exception of Akbar, every Muslim king imposed pilgrimage tax on Hindus who wanted to visit places sacred to them. Aurangzeb increased it to extortionate rates with the express intent of ensuring that Hindus would find it impossible to pay. The badshahs and nawabs after him maintained the same rate. But the Marathas didn't give up. They kept trying to recover Kashi, Ayodhya and Allahabad—Prayag—so that Hindus could painlessly undertake their pilgrimages. No matter how many wars they won and how many mountains of gold they paid, Muslim kings refused to hand over these cities. Meanwhile, the English, who had become powerful both militarily and politically, took the side of the Muslims. Nana Phadnavis offered his army in support of the British in the war against Tipu Sultan on the condition that the British should hand over the control of Kashi to him. The British refused his offer, which soured the Maratha-British relations.

The Vishwanath temple ceased to exist from 1669, the year Aurangzeb demolished it, up to about 1775 when Ahalyabai Holkar

managed to build the tiny structure that we see today: this structure, adjacent to the Gyanvapi masjid is what is worshipped as the Vishwanath temple. During the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, Muslims attempted to plant a green flag atop this tiny structure that Ahalayabai had built. This move only helped the British.

Post Independence, India's political leaders constitutionally sanctified the policy that the British had cultivated in order to preserve their political power. This led to the Muslims hardening their stance—that the Constitution itself armed them against returning the temples, which their ancestors had destroyed, back to the Hindus. Lord Valentia, 1803: '…I felt myself sufficiently a Hindoo when viewing the lofty minars [of Aurangzeb's mosque], to wish that hereafter, Government may restore the spot to its original owners, and remove this cruel eye-sore from the holy city.' (George Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt*, Part 1, London, 1811, pp 90). Municipalities of Hindu pilgrimage centres continue to impose pilgrimage tax despite the fact that Muslim rule ended centuries ago. I fail to find the proper term to describe this despicable mindset of our own people who continue to perpetrate the unjust, discriminatory traditions of alien invaders.

Lakshmi felt a sense of contentment. She doubted if the Kashi portion of her novel would have been as effective if she had merely relied on her father's research and her own notes. She intuitively knew that writing this part in her father's home in the village would have severely impaired her imagination. Plus, she wouldn't have learned what she learned about Kashi after Aurangzeb. She was glad she wrote it here, in Kashi. Books, travelogues by European travellers, research papers, history journals, translations of the Peshwa official records…she mentally thanked the assistant librarian Sarala Pant, who had painstakingly retrieved everything she asked for. Lakshmi thought she had had a revelation.

She wouldn't leave Kashi for the next five or six months. At the end of five months, she still didn't feel like leaving it.

14

My visit to Kashi earned me an enormous degree of freedom. I was bored of zenana duty. Hamdullah Sahib's recommendation got me a job in his own office. I was tasked to copy out the Mughal Empire's official documents. Although there was no change in my status as a slave, I now began to earn a salary. I shifted my residence to Hamdullah Sahib's house and ate my meals there. I gave half my salary to him to cover my food expenses. At office, I was regarded as one of the most loyal servants of the Mughal Empire and that got me a good deal of respect. Not a day passed without someone congratulating me on the good fortune of going to Benares for the sole purpose of witnessing the destruction of the most sacred place of the kafirs. But I spent my days fancying a plan to chop the roots of Aurangzeb's empire. I visualized myself cutting single-handedly through hundreds of thousands of fierce warriors and felling Aurangzeb's head in one swift blow. And every time, in the end, I would feel ashamed of such fruitless daydreaming.

The good thing about my newfound freedom was that it allowed me to meet Shyamala at will. I had already met her four times. I could arrange a horse whenever I wanted. Shabana Begum was only too happy to let me meet Shyamala. She took a curious joy in learning that this Tabassum actually had a husband, that this Tabassum who had managed to attract *her* husband with her raw, bounteous youth was actually another man's wife. She took special care to arrange our trysts in the cattle shed. Not only that, she even sent us delicious lunch. She allowed the children to be with us. I developed a special affection for Ibrahim. I had promised her that I'd treat all her children with equal love and I demonstrated the truth of my words by petting them, holding them in my arms and playing with them. One day, I said, 'Shyamala, I can pay money and get you released from your slavery. Or I can use my goodwill and ask Shabana Begum to release you. Either way, it should work. I can likewise get myself released and then we both can live somewhere as husband and wife. I anyway earn a salary now.'

‘How’s that possible?’

‘Why not?’

‘But…but…aren’t you a eunuch?’ she blurted out and then bit her lip, realizing what she had said.

There was nothing wrong in what she had said. It was the truth. I was a eunuch and I knew it but I made this proposal in a rash moment of intense emotion. There was no indignity, no humiliation, no debasement that both of us hadn’t undergone, and I reasoned that the physical expression of love wouldn’t be a barrier to our lives together again as husband and wife. I wanted to tell her as much but my heart had already sunk. No words came out. I left the place and didn’t return for three months. She was a slave, not a wife, but she still had two children from Dilshad Khan. She had experienced physical pleasure from him…she still did. She was a slave but led a relatively comfortable life. In a way she was right. It made no sense for her to abandon this to go live in poverty with a man who was really not a man. And why? Because of some relationship she had shared with him for a brief period in a time that was now only a very dim recollection? I felt very hurt but took solace in reality—I was a eunuch and nothing could alter that.

Some days later, I heard news about Shivaji. Everyone in the office…the whispers spread throughout Delhi. Investigation about his escape revealed many things. His illness was a ruse, an elaborate plot. He said his religion mandated him to make offerings of flowers and fruit to Brahmins so that he may be cured. And so every day he sent large baskets of fruits, flowers and sweets. One day, he slid his own body into the basket and coiled himself in such a way that he fit inside. And escaped! His pursuers, the swift horsemen who were instantly dispatched to get him, failed to detect even the faintest scent. Once he reached his kingdom, he began to recapture his lost forts one after the other. I recalled the sadhu’s words on the banks of the Ganga: Shivaji will soon be crowned, like a proper maharaja. Shivaji was shrewd. He had anticipated that the badshah would send his soldiers to the south to pursue him if need be, even to the heart of the Maratha country. And so he fled in the opposite direction: from Agra towards Mathura. In Mathura, he shaved his beard, moustache and head and donned the robes of a sanyasin. He travelled eastward until he reached Prayag. From there he headed southward and took twenty-five days to finally reach the Maratha country. Overnight, he became a hero to the people of Delhi. He was now a character to emulate. People who hadn’t seen him here began to make up tales. They said they had

seen him in the badshah's darbar. Even the badshah's staunch loyalists couldn't refrain from admiring his strategy, guts and presence of mind.

Another tiding reached my ears. Chattrasal from Bundelkhand had met Shivaji and asked to be part of his army. Chattrasal's, father, Champakram was one of the vassals who had helped Aurangzeb Badshah in his battle for the Mughal throne. But in later years, the badshah had some misunderstanding with him and hunted him down with a large force, forcing him to commit suicide. It took Jaipur's Mirza Raja Jai Singh to intercede and persuade the badshah to allow Chattrasal to join the Badshah's army. This was the same Jai Singh who had cornered Shivaji into coming to Agra. Chattrasal had fought in that battle against Shivaji. But things changed after Shivaji escaped from Badshah Aurangzeb's clutches. This was a courageous warrior who refused to become the feudatory of the Mughal Empire and subordinate his strength in the service of someone whose only goal was temple destruction. This raw display of courage won over Chattrasal, who approached him with a request to make him a commander.

Shivaji said, 'We have enough warriors in the Maratha country ready to fight for freedom. But then freedom of the Marathas doesn't mean that the entire Hindustan will automatically become free. You return to Bundelkhand and inspire your people to revolt against the Mughals. You have my complete support.' It seems Chattrasal had returned to Bundelkhand. In the beginning, people had neither the courage nor the enthusiasm to rebel. But when Aurangzeb Badshah pulled down the Keshavaraya temple at Mathura, the Bundels' tolerance was breached. Akbar Badshah had sent his most trusted and loyal aide Ab-ul-Fazal—the man who wrote *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnama*—to quell the rebellion unleashed by the badshah's son Salim. When Salim learnt of this, he sent for Bir Singh, one of the Bundels to murder Ab-ul-Fazal. Bir Singh promptly had him murdered en route. Later when Salim became the emperor and took the title of Jahangir, he rewarded Bir Singh's loyalty by granting him permission to build the Keshavaraya temple at Mathura at the spot where the Lord Krishna was born. And this, in a land ruled by Muslims where non-Muslims were forbidden from building any place of worship. The Bundels had a special reverence for this temple. And now Aurangzeb had demolished this temple and built a mosque on the very same spot and had used the pillars, idols and other material from the destroyed temple. The enraged Bundels united under Chattrasal and declared their independence. The badshah was now frantically busy readying troops to

vanquish this rebellion.

Needless to say, Hamdullah Sahib as always was my source of this kind of detailed information. He continued to refer to Shivaji in the most derogatory language. Now he added Chattrasal to the list. He said Chattrasal was a dog, who was destined to be dispatched to eternal hell very soon. Something suddenly struck me when I slept that night. A fraction of a moment of weakness resulted in a life of unending humiliation. How many more years should I live like this? Why didn't I have Shivaji's courage? A man who, in spite of the badshah's insurmountable security, not only escaped but rebuilt his empire and continues to grow from strength to strength? Besides, what is manhood? A mere ability to physically join a woman? I recalled the names from the Muslim history of Hindustan of eunuchs who had grown to become fierce warriors. Plenty of them.

Sleep eluded me that night. The next morning I reflected on my state: a eunuch who spent all his life in the zenana unexposed to physical hardship, pampered by rich food and protected from the harsh sun. What kind of courage could I have? Of course, I could console myself by resigning to fate. I spent two days in this manner. I was a dog that timidly tucked its tail between its legs when kicked. I made the decision a week later. It didn't matter how many enemies I killed in battle or how many I protected. I had to be a free person if only for a day. Freedom. I could escape. Shivaji had set the example. Like him I could shave my head, beard and moustache and don saffron robes. Then nobody would pursue me. But if—and it was a real possibility—I was inspected and they saw that I was circumcised, I knew what would happen. Instant death was the punishment for a Muslim who tried to quit Islam. This was a bad idea. I found an easier way. I could easily obtain permission to travel. I'd tell them that I was desirous of visiting Alamgir Badshah's fort and the Taj Mahal to admire their grandeur and magnificence. I could escape from there and reach the jungle. A few days of journey and I would be in Chattrasal's fold. I decided not to go to the Maratha country. That was a country that ensured safety: safety that Shivaji provided. I didn't want safety. I wanted to be a part of—to help and serve Chattrasal who was located so close to the Mughal capital and who was struggling to establish an independent kingdom.

My decision carried with it a question. I wanted to—for the last time—find out if Shyamala preferred to remain Tabassum. But Ibrahim, he was born of my seed. If she refused to join me, I could at least take him with me. The

sole survivor of the Devagarh dynasty. If he remained there, in Dilshad Khan's home, he would become a soldier and one day, would partake in temple destruction and jaziya-extortion. I thought of saving him from this destiny.

I mounted my horse and soon reached the cattle shed. I then sent a message to Shabana Begum through a female servant. I waited. And waited more. Anxiety. Suspicion that became stronger with each moment. And with it, fear. I was convinced that she had decided that I was unfit for marital life. What if she had informed Dilshad Khan! I cursed myself for not considering this possibility. If that happened, my head would roll. It would be over before it started. I sweated and tried to pace the cattle shed. And then I saw her. A lapse of an agonizing hour. I decided to make small talk, enquire about her well-being and leave. But I noticed her expression as she neared me. She was clearly very worried. She said nothing as she sat opposite me. I searched for something to say. After a long, awkward moment, I said, 'So, how are you?'

'Six months. Isn't that correct? You've come to see me after six months. I understand you're angry. You should be. You asked me to be your wife like before and I said the first thing that came to my mind. Shall I tell you something? Dilshad Khan has four wives…he can pronounce talaq to one of the four just so he can marry another girl who catches his fancy. Or concubines, depending on his whim, wealth and ability. This is the setting I've spent most of my life in. I found it tough to conceive of a marriage without physical relations. Anyway, now I've told you the truth. Tell me, is your proposal still open?'

I couldn't believe my ears. I stared at her with wide-open eyes.

'Do you intend to test me with that look?' she said.

'It's no longer about both of us living as husband and wife.' And I told her everything from my journey to Kashi, and Shivaji and Chattrasal, and my decision to join him.

'I'll take permission from Udaipuri Mahal to visit Agra. Can you leave this place with the children? All we both need is permission to stay away for three days. That's enough for us to cross Agra and enter the jungle. By the time they realize that we're missing, we would've entered the Bundels' territory. But life will be tough. And we're not leaving this life so that we can live comfortably elsewhere. We're leaving so that we can be free. To die, if necessary, for our freedom.'

She didn't say anything for a very long time. Then, 'Let's not tell

anybody that we're leaving the kingdom to support the rebels in their struggle. All I need to do is tell Shabana Begum that I want to get out of here and live with you. She'll pay any amount to get me freed. She stands to gain by losing a competitor. Dilshad Khan Sahib doesn't have any real affection for the two children that were born to his seed. He has numerous such children from many different women. The begum will only be happy if my children disappear from her sight forever. You make your arrangements.'

15

His hair had fully grown, both in volume and shape, much before he returned from the United States, and after weeks had regained their former splendour. He got it dyed black, with small lines of white that peeked out from strategic locations. He was pleased. At his age, not too many people were blessed with such thick, luxurious hair growth. Most would be bald. He felt proud of his genes. With it the memory of his mother returned. His father had started to go bald quite early. But his mother? He felt this realization carried a deep insight—there was no connection between intelligence and baldness, he thought and chuckled as he looked at himself in the mirror.

He was scheduled to leave for Delhi. He reached the airport well ahead of time and spotted Lakshmi standing in line at the economy class check-in counter, awaiting her turn. As was customary, he travelled business class and there was no line there. He finished his check-in procedure, walked up to her and said, ‘Hi Lakshmi! Can’t you get a phone line drawn to your village? You have no idea how many times I’ve tried to contact you! I’m going to the same meeting as you.’ With a naughty twinkle in his eyes, ‘It pains me to see you travelling economy. You should’ve written, telling them that you can’t travel economy. I got it changed to business class.’

‘It’s just two and a half hours. How does it matter where I sit?’

‘Ah! But you miss the real point. We could’ve had some great conversation!’

‘Sure. But I’ll need to pay a lot of money to get my ticket upgraded to your class. The government won’t pay. But if you travel in my class, the airline folks won’t object.’

‘You know I never discriminate between classes. All are equal. Let the flight take off, I’ll join you.’

The economy class had plenty of vacant seats. Professor Sastri sat next to her shortly after the flight took off. She spoke first. ‘We waited for you. Why didn’t you come?’

He looked into her eyes and said in that intimate tone, ‘Frankly speaking, what’s all this atonement business about? I mean, I’m okay with sleeping in the temple if that’s the *only* place left on earth…but…’

‘You have an enormous ego…I mean, self-image.’ She couldn’t resist cutting him off, meeting his eyes with a determined intensity.

He could argue on this point but something in the way she looked at him told him that she would win. So he said, ‘Tell me, who all had come? The thirteenth day is supposed to be very special, I’m sure there was a quite a crowd. I’ll tell you the truth. I wanted to bear the cost of the funeral from start to finish but you know how it is—“who needs his money if he’s unwilling to do the rites for his own mother” and all that talk…’

‘You didn’t pay. Your son did. You didn’t do the rites. He did… Well, parts of it. He, his wife and child served food to everybody in the traditional way, took out the plantain leaves on which the guests had eaten and later, wiped the floor. His wife is an amazing girl. Everybody sang their praises for hours.’

‘Who told him the news? He had absolutely no contact with his grandparents! Did you tell him?’

‘He was in touch with them. Remember Jayaram? Your sister’s son who stays in Madras? It seems Diganth’s company does some business with his company. They met over some business deal, got talking and found out they shared the same mother tongue. And one thing led to the other and it was not long before they discovered that they were first cousins. That was enough. Their families became close really quickly. He stays at Jayaram’s place whenever he visits Madras and Jayaram does the same when he comes to Bangalore. Jayaram drove him down to Narasapura and introduced him to your parents. After this, Diganth visited his grandparents at least once a year. Each time he went, he would make an offering of dhotis and saris to his grandparents and he’d make it a point to have food there and prostrate before them the traditional way. It seems he also gave them ten thousand rupees. And then he sought out your other sisters and told them who he was. They’re all quite a well-knit family circle now. Remember, Jayaram had called you to inform that your mother had passed away? He rushed to Madras and on the same night called Diganth and told him the sad news. Diganth and his wife came to Narasapura the very next day. He spoke to his grandfather and your sisters and gave them fifty thousand rupees, saying, “Grandmother lived a full life. She deserves a dignified funeral. I’m sorry I can’t stay back because

I must leave for Abu Dhabi urgently on business. I'll be back on the thirteenth day…"'

The professor looked at her with a half-shocked expression. He didn't pretend to remain unaffected by this saga of his own son backstabbing him. *Why didn't he tell me directly that he loved his grandparents? That he wanted to see them often? How did he conclude that I'd refuse to grant him permission? How did he think I was that cheap? I'm not a tyrant. Besides, he had full democratic rights to meet anybody he wished to meet.* Then the professor recalled that both husband and wife were very cordial with him. They had never said anything that would upset him. Ever. *And they used my connections to grow their business*. Lakshmi continued speaking, '…we've decided to have the Narasimha temple renovated in Granny's name. We'll get an architect from Bangalore. For now, we've estimated five lakh rupees. Don't bother about the money. And they've put me in charge of supervising the renovation work. Diganth's wife has greater devotion and faith in these things. It seems they go to the annual pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi without fail every year. Also to Tirupati. They drive down till the foothills, park the car there and climb all the way up…'

The mention of Tirupati reminded the professor of a conversation with his daughter-in-law. He had told her that the god of Tirupati was a capitalist god; that the majority of those who made that pilgrimage hailed from the middle, lower-middle and poor classes. She had smiled politely and said, 'That means the pilgrimage is their way of saying that even they want to become capitalists.'

To which he'd replied, '…which is exactly what Marx condemned as the opium of the masses.'

She didn't stop smiling, 'And Russia lost its ambitious war against destroying this opium. So did China. And so did India, which has moved away from such opium-destroying adventures and embraced capitalism, which is what is letting us do our business. Am I right?'

He didn't argue further. A woman. Way younger to him. It'd be a major blow to his pride if he lost an argument with her. Now he was unsure why they had concealed the fact that they were in constant touch with their grandparents. Was it because they were scared of him? Or was it plain diplomacy? They both were businessmen loath to talk about things that had even the smallest potential for argument. Rage welled up within him against his son but what could he chide him for? He felt as if somebody had ignited

wildfire in his head. He angrily pressed the call button. When the air hostess appeared, he showed her his business-class pass and said, ‘A large gin please.’ He turned to Lakshmi. ‘You?’

‘No thanks, sir.’

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The government had organized a three-day seminar to discuss and find ways to achieve national integration and foster communal harmony. It had sent invitations to eminent people from all walks of life—intellectuals, professors, scholars and historians. About thirty people turned up at the seminar from various parts of India. Most of these were regulars on TV and in print. Razia was the only exception. She had disappeared from TV for the last five years. Several people recognized her in the tea party just before the session started: ‘Where have you vanished, Madam? Are you still in India?’ Professor Sastri played his part to perfection. He was the gracious host who went around making cordial talk and generally making everybody feel important. The secretary and assistant secretary from the ministry went around likewise, greeting everybody and making them feel welcome. None of the invitees failed to notice the difference in the way these two powerful bureaucrats treated each invitee. It became quickly evident to everyone the kind of influence the professor wielded. Earlier when they were waiting for their luggage at the Delhi airport, he told Razia that he had recommended her name for this seminar. Unlike others who were lodged in Hotel Janpath, a car from the ministry arrived and transported him to the state-owned five-star Hotel Ashok. She took a taxi to Hotel Janpath.

The minister who inaugurated the seminar walked in. Most of the invitees went up to him and availed of the good fortune of his introduction. He smiled, shook hands and spoke to each person in a genial tone. He enquired about their health, general well-being and asked them if they were satisfied with their accommodation. He knew a few of them for some years. He was not a minister of the old days. He didn’t wear that trademark politician-uniform of kurta, pajama and white topi—all made of khadi. He was dressed in a safari suit stitched with terry-cot mixed khadi.

He adorned the stage several minutes after the introductions were done.

‘You’re all highly learned people here, and you know the truth better than I, that this nation has no future unless we destroy the divisive forces of caste,

community and religion, which are tearing this great nation into pieces. Evil forces have already infiltrated most of the institutions—education, art, universities, literature, research and media. This seminar has been organized with the express purpose of seeking recommendations on the course of action that the government has to embark upon to uproot these evil forces. Please keep in mind that this is just a precursor—the government will take the actual decision, however tough it may prove to be. The direction, rules and conduct of this seminar will be set by this country's pre-eminent intellectual, Professor Sastri, in his keynote address.'

The audience was impressed. This was no ordinary minister. He was a very smart politician.

Professor Sastri got up. He smiled warmly, said a few words about the minister and praised the current government. Then he said that the nation was at a fork in the road to the future.

'India was never one-dimensional. Ajanta and Ellora are as important to us as the Taj Mahal. Let's not forget that the number of foreign tourists that visit the Taj Mahal greatly outnumber the number that visit Vijayanagar. Let it be said again and again, yet again, that there was nothing like Hindus versus Muslims at any point in this country's history! We must counter a poisonous assertion that has infected our education of late if we want to save our children from this toxic propaganda: the assertion that Muslim kings demolished Hindu places of worship and that they were intolerant of other religions. Accordingly, every participant of this seminar has the weighty responsibility—and goal—to come out with specific recommendations for tackling this menace. How should we design our educational curriculum? What's the method and pattern of teaching history that we should adopt? How should the media, artists, publishers and critics shape public discourse so that this grave threat to national integration is effectively checked? This is only a preliminary seminar. Several more of this nature have already been planned. The recommendations provided at the end of each seminar will be examined, aggregated and acted upon as appropriate. In the coming months, there will be seminars dedicated to specific fields of endeavour. For now, we need to evolve certain general guidelines. The honourable minister has asked me to set the direction, rules and conduct for this seminar. Frankly, I've already declined to accept this responsibility, given the presence of someone like him who's far senior to me in accomplishment. However, I must also humbly bow before the verdict of the audience…' At the end of a dazzling

display of oratory that lasted forty-five minutes, it was clear to everyone that he was indispensable to this seminar. Equally, everyone knew that they were there in the first place because the professor had recommended their names. Professor Sastri was the minister's choice.

'What is the verdict of the gathering with regard to the choice of chairperson for this seminar?' the minister asked. The faint noise of the first few hands that clapped gradually grew to deafening levels as the entire audience joined in.

The actual proceedings began after the minister left. Servants supplied biscuits, tea and coffee to everybody seated. After many digressions, the chairperson steered the topic to the area of his focus.

'The one area, the one field, indeed the most fertile field where evil forces have sown the seeds of divisiveness is history: the *teaching* of history to be precise. We all agree that the goal of history is to show the road to progressiveness. In other words, to ensure harmonious living based on the principles of innate human equality. However, shameless lies—like the ones about Muslims demolishing Hindu temples and forcibly converting people of other faiths—have managed to find their way into our history books. And so the urgent task is to clean up our history texts, to erase these lies and to tell the truth. We must thoroughly revise our history curriculum and disseminate it across all schools and colleges in India. In other words, come up with recommendations for a model history textbook. To that end, we must constitute a core committee of experts…'

When she heard this, Lakshmi at first felt chagrined, which turned progressively to annoyance and then disgust. She found it hard not to stand up and call this man's bluff. She also realized that this was a seminar comprising scholars who had earned national renown. She didn't want to be cornered. This seminar had been organized by the highest levels of the central government.

'…to purge the perversions of truth about Aurangzeb, Tipu Sultan, Sultan Mohammad Ghori, Mohammad Ghazni…'

She stood up. She didn't know how the words hurtled out from her mouth, 'Sir, have you seen Benares?'

It was as though someone had suddenly erected a rude dam that stopped the professor's deluge-like oratory. 'Huh?' He looked at her. 'How do you mean?'

'A huge mosque stands on the site of the Vishwanath temple. The local

Muslims themselves refer to it as the Gyanvapi masjid. Behind this is a small temple-like structure, which devout Hindus regard as the Vishwanath temple where they offer their worship. So who built that mosque and why did they build it on that spot? It certainly feels good to deliver a sweep-all speech. However, before you do that, you need to answer similar questions about some thirty thousand such Gynavapi mosques.' She was surprised by the emotion in her voice.

'Let's see. Here's the thing: some mosque was built somewhere on an empty plot of land. Assuming that Aurangzeb built it, how does it prove that he built it after demolishing a pre-existing temple on the same site? What's the evidence? Isn't it unscientific to simply make assertions?' he retorted, beaming confidence.

'Have you heard of Saqi Mustad Khan? He wrote the history of the life and times of Aurangzeb after being commanded to do so by Inayatulla Khan Kashmiri, the last prime minister of Aurangzeb. This was Inayatulla Khan's way of paying posthumous tributes to someone he truly regarded as the ideal emperor. And in order to write the book, Saqi Mustad Khan went through the official records documented, maintained and archived during Aurangzeb's rule. This book is called *Maasir-E-Alamgiri*. Every line in this work is supported by such official evidence. The same book tells us that in 1669, a report was received by the court about the successful demolition of the Kashi Vishwanath temple as per the orders of Alamgir Aurangzeb. The next chapter of the same work tells us that in the holy month of Ramzan in 1670, Aurangzeb ordered that the Keshavaraya temple in Mathura be demolished and a mosque built on its site. I wish to bring to the attention of this gathering that the Vishwanath temple was destroyed in the twelfth year of Aurangzeb's reign and the Keshavaraya temple in the thirteenth year.'

The audience lapsed into silence instantly. She had found her voice after spending five years in near-total silence.

'The goal of inculcating harmony between Hindus and Muslims is both lofty and necessary and it has my full support. However, you can't build a strong society on the foundation of untruth. Over twenty-five lakh pilgrims visit Varanasi every year. To these pilgrims, Varanasi is that ultimate and dateless spiritual harbour, the earthly berth of an entire way of life symbolized by the Vishwanath temple. This is the kind of fervour and longing every Hindu has for the Vishwanath temple. It is this fervour that makes them visualize a grand mental image of the temple. However, when

they actually go there, they're aghast, and their mental image is shattered. Disappointment doesn't fully describe the feeling they experience when they see with their own eyes that the object of their devotion doesn't exist. In its place, a huge mosque towers over not just the temple site—it invades the vision of the entire city, which Hindus consider as their holiest. Now, these pilgrims return home thoroughly disillusioned and share their disillusionment with family, cousins, relatives, neighbours and friends. When this is the bitter, everyday reality, on what basis do we hope to promote Hindu–Muslim amity? You can rewrite history textbooks and cover up these historical truths. But when the students who've read your textbooks go on educational tours to such places and ask uncomfortable questions, what answers should their teachers give? This is not just about Kashi or Ayodhya. Historical research yields us some thirty thousand temples that were destroyed by Muslim kings. Will you argue that wild animals destroyed them? Or will you argue that various sects within Hinduism—the Buddhists, Jains, Vaishnavas and Shaivites—quarrelled and destroyed each other's temples? Not one scripture or text of these sects preach iconoclasm and temple destruction. In a stray case where this has happened, these sects have not glorified such an iconoclast as a role model. Iconoclasm, temple destruction, conversion at sword-point, jaziya, large-scale slave trading…these are precedents set by the founder who not only carried them out in his own lifetime but laid them down as the basic tenets of that faith. These are barbaric deeds done in a barbaric country at a specific point in history. How can we expect to achieve national integration and communal harmony if these beliefs persist, if these tenets continue to be preached and carried out even today? When it was envisaged, the makers of our Constitution rejected the hierarchical system of society that Manu and other lawmakers propounded thousands of years ago. In quite the same way, we can't achieve true harmony unless we reject the belief and the mindset that asserts its superiority to the exclusion of everything else; a mindset that preaches conversion or death of those who hold a different view. Integration and harmony are meaningful only when we teach our children that Truth is one but is described differently by different people. How we can accomplish this should be the goal of this seminar.'

She was astonished and happy at the same time. It was as if some force was propelling her. Besides, she knew she had enough material to last for more than three days. She hadn't brought any notes or books. Until she got here, she had no idea what this seminar was really about. And now it didn't

matter. Her confidence rested on the strength of her father's painstaking study coupled with her own research. She knew most of it almost by rote. She looked at the participants individually. She took her time to meet their eyes. It became clear to her that they realized they were being sized up. She thought she'd already won half the battle. And then she saw him. She didn't recall seeing him when she had entered the hall. Later, when she spoke spiritedly, her focus had been on the professor. He must have come in late, after the session started. For some reason she felt nervous. But she would lose everything if she didn't conquer this nervousness. She looked at his face first and then, more pointedly, at his eyes and held his gaze. Amir returned her gaze for a bit, then more forcefully and then in a moment, his eyeballs shifted and his gaze dropped and took refuge in the file on the table.

'Thank you for clearly stating your perspective. If anybody has any observations or objections to Begum Razia's opinion, they're free to state them,' the professor suddenly said and looked to the people seated at the extreme end of the round table.

Lakshmi was furious. She had not yet finished but the professor had cleverly manipulated the situation. She looked at him again. His charming smile and the hint of naughtiness in his eyes told her that he had successfully managed hundreds of such uncomfortable situations. Now she turned to look at the extreme end of the round table. Ten people. Ten beards. It was tough to make out if they were Marxist or modern Muslim beards. She was reminded of her son's beard. One of them spoke. 'This isn't the first time I'm meeting someone who accuses a religion and its Prophet on the strength of half-baked knowledge. But if someone can explain how such a person was invited to a seminar comprising responsible people, I shall be grateful.'

It only took her a moment to understand that this was a direct personal attack. She wanted to turn the question back to him: that the audience has an equal right to know how *he* was invited and that making personal attacks instead of answering serious, valid questions was in poor taste. She refrained.

Now the man seated next to him said, 'Madam, do you know Farsi? If you do, can you tell us how well you know it? I'm asking this because the work you quoted, *Masir-e-Alamgiri*, is in Farsi.'

'No. I don't know Farsi. I've relied on Jadunath Sarkar's translation.'

Condescending laughter erupted from the entire group.

'We have nothing to say to someone who relies on a communal historian,' a voice said.

And another, ‘Someone who knows no Farsi, relies on translations and is still convinced of her facts. We have serious doubts about the standard of your scholarship.’

‘Do you know Greek?’ she shot back immediately.

‘No. Why?’

‘So you don’t know Greek but haven’t you studied the history of ancient Europe in translation?’ she said.

As he fumbled for a response, the man sitting next to him said, ‘We’re retarding the progress of this seminar by fighting amongst ourselves. This respected lady has already consumed forty-five valuable minutes. One person cannot monopolize the seminar. Everybody should have their turn. We’re thirty people here. At the rate of forty-five minutes per person, that translates to a total of twenty-two and a half hours. Can we afford that kind of time? Even if we can, this is surely a useless way of spending it, in my humble opinion. The honourable chairperson must give a ruling.’

The chairperson ruled, ‘Let others speak. Mrs Razia Querishi will get her turn again.’

She responded swiftly, ‘The question is far more serious than whose turn it is. Respected Chairperson, I’m asking fundamental questions—questions of constructing a building on a solid foundation. Politicians are creatively reinterpreting the lives and deeds of historical persons through mouthpieces, through people who’re willing to do it for them. Politicians have their party ideology to back these perversions and our artists, writers and film-makers are producing works based on history by perverting history just so they can please these politicians. Can I safely assume that this seminar doesn’t intend recommending such literary works to be prescribed in the curriculum?’

‘What are you talking about? And if you’re that convinced about the so-called perversions, can we have some examples please?’

The voice came from the right. Lakshmi turned to look at her. Sixth chair. Wearing a red coloured sari and blouse that stopped short of being completely sleeveless. A chain made of large red beads that clamoured for attention. She wasn’t wearing a bindi. Raziya looked at her searchingly, trying to place her. The lady continued, ‘How proper is it on your part to talk disrespectfully about the Prophet of one of the world’s major religions?’

‘I’ve neither spoken nor intend to speak disrespectfully about anybody let alone a Prophet. An honest seeker of historical truth should *not* show disrespect to any person—historical or contemporary. I’ll let the facts speak

for themselves…so what did the Prophet do in Arabia?' she paused, looked at the lady intently and then, 'His first wife, Khadija, was a smart and prosperous businesswoman. She lived in a society that allowed her both the social and economic freedom to run an extensive caravan business. She chose her third husband on her own, a man fifteen years younger than her. He remained faithful to her as long as she was alive. After her death—he was over fifty-two then—he married eleven women.' She turned and looked at all the faces around the round table before finally resting her gaze on Amir. It appeared as if she had placed the burden of answer solely on his shoulders. 'After this, which woman in the entire history of Islam had that kind of economic independence? Pre-Islamic Arabia worshipped several female deities but Islam has no female God. Who has the guts to question why Allah should only be a male God? Why don't the aggressive champions of female equality here in this country ask this question? Why doesn't anybody talk about the ill-effects that Islamic aggression had on Indian women? Why is everybody silent about the Muslim invaders who carted off hundreds of thousands of Indian women and sold them in the lucrative slave markets in Kabul, Iran and Turan, and why don't our feminists reveal the fact that the direct consequence of such sex slavery was responsible for a sudden and widespread increase in the sati practice, which later developed into a full-fledged tradition in Rajasthan, Punjab and most of north India? Why doesn't anybody ask why marriages in north India are still conducted during the night? Our intellectuals, like frogs that croak only in the rainy season, relish in blaming all the ills of India on the door of Hinduism and its Dharmashastras. Do they know history? Post Renaissance, Europe grew rapidly in strength—mechanized ships, faster travel, expeditions across the globe, invention of the printing machine that quickened the spread of knowledge…while all this was happening there, what was happening here? Muslim rule was near-total in India. Muslim kings were busy hoarding gold and women, killing and converting the native majority Hindu population, destroying and looting temples, and burning down books, libraries and famed centres of learning such as Nalanda, Takshashila and Odantapuri. What kind of history blames India's present-day backwardness on Hindu scriptures that were written thousands of years ago, when the real answer is found in the history of this country dating back to just a thousand years? This history is an unending narrative of how India was successively weakened militarily, spiritually, morally and culturally. Why doesn't anyone talk about who was

responsible for sucking out India's vigour? Even Akbar—unarguably the most powerful Muslim emperor—sought the protection of the Portuguese navy, which controlled Indian waters, so that Indian Muslims could safely do the Haj pilgrimage. What does this say about India's military might? So what do you ladies and gentlemen say? What is the history we need to teach our children?' She paused, took a deep breath and looked around. Silence. Amir continued to stare at the file.

She waited longer. Silence. 'I ask the artists, writers and playwrights in this gathering to tell the truth: which other faith or religion in the world allows the kind of unfettered freedom of expression in song, dance and literature that Hinduism allows? Which other faith or religion honours art as the sibling of spiritual bliss and worships a true artist as a rishi, a sage? We can abuse our gods and poke fun at our religious gurus. Which faith admits this kind of freedom? Europeans fought a long and tough battle and finally achieved this freedom after Renaissance. And in Islam, we can't even *imagine* something like this. But what are our people doing? Our own artists are using this freedom to extinguish the very religion that gives it to them. And they're doing this with full knowledge of what will happen if that other faith takes complete control of the land. What explains this self-deception, this willing prostitution?' She was trembling now and for a moment she thought she was possessed. When she looked around the table now, her eyes were wide and furious.

Silence.

The Marxist-beards got up from their seats. Chairperson Sastri spoke: 'We're running late. Lunch has already been delayed by forty-five minutes. My heartfelt thanks to Mrs Razia for presenting her perspective. Post lunch, other participants shall speak in turn.'

It was clear to her that Amir was purposely avoiding her by trying to appear busy talking to someone. He knew several people here and now he was more popular. His documentaries had received nationwide acclaim. He was closer to these people here than she was given that she had withdrawn from this circle for five years. And the fact that he was *still* trying to avoid her added to her confidence.

The post-lunch session began with a speaker who opened by saying that the aim of studying history was to foster harmony in society and that it was useless in the present time to keep the memory of past acrimonies alive. Another speaker said that the Hindu–Muslim divide was the poisonous seed

sown by the British and that there was no enmity between Hindus and Muslims until the British conquered India. Lakshmi listened as speaker after speaker elucidated theories upon theories.

'The people of the oppressed classes invited Muslim invaders to liberate them from the hierarchical social order. But for Prophet Mohammad's preaching, the lives of these classes would have been damned forever.'

'If Muslims were alien invaders, so were the Aryans.'

'Remember that idol worship originated from the symbolism which says that the Brahmins issued forth from God's mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet.'

'Islamic iconoclasm hit the upper classes the hardest which is why they began to fan the flames of Muslim hatred.'

Lakshmi interrupted, 'Lies! All of them! All lies! Plenty of irrefutable evidence exists to show how tens of thousands of these upper classes escaped to the jungles because they couldn't afford to pay jaziya. The followers of Maharana Prathap who lost to Akbar swore that they wouldn't enter any city until they defeated the Mughals. Their descendants are the people of the nomadic Gadia Lohar tribe in today's Rajasthan. An entire body of research devoted to the study of the origins of this tribe is available. The British invented the theory that the Aryans were alien invaders so that they could justify their own empire in India. There was no such thing as a separate Aryan and Dravidian civilization in India.'

'It is bad manners to interrupt when someone is speaking,' a voice from her right said, and simultaneously another voice, 'I kindly call upon the chairperson to restrain this lady who speaks like a know-it-all. There has been no quality progress at all!'

The chairperson addressed her in a loud, curt tone, 'Madam Razia, will you please restrain yourself? Do *not* create conditions for yourself that will force me to pass a harsh judgement on you.'

Lakshmi nodded and sat down and said nothing after that. *They've chosen their invitees well. They invited me based on my previous record.* She scanned the hall again. There was nobody here who had an alternate, let alone opposing line to take. By evening it was clear that Professor Sastri had driven the whole seminar—from its title to the invitee list to actually writing the recommendations for who to invite and why. *He only knows that I left Bangalore to stay in Narasapura after Father's death to study. He doesn't know what I was exactly studying. And he recommended my name assuming*

that I was still Razia the Revolutionary whom he had known all these years. And now he must be feeling rotten but he's still showing immense patience because my son…now a hardcore Sharia husband…has married his daughter. In a way this seminar's good…drew out five years of knowledge I had piled up within me in one go. But why didn't he tell me in the flight that he had also invited Amir? Perhaps the ministry had suggested it without informing him?

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He hadn't, in his wildest imagination, expected to see her here. He didn't know the intent of this seminar. The invite hadn't specified anything clearly. He saw that it had arrived from the ministry, which merely asked him to 'kindly attend the seminar'. He didn't know who was behind it. Neither did Professor Sastri tell him anything even on the phone. He rarely, if ever, called him nowadays. Amir thought his second nikah had upset the professor but he didn't care much for the professor's displeasure. The fact that the ministry had entrusted him with a whole lot of documentary projects aimed at promoting national integration was the reason he was invited to this. This seemed to be a convincing answer.

He felt uncomfortable the moment he saw her in that hall. He hadn't given much thought to how he would react if he met her. He knew the possibility did exist but he hadn't consciously prepared for it—she, studying the books that her father had collected over the years and he, busy with his documentaries. He began to sense that the distance between Bangalore to Narasapura increased each time she visited him until one day it became clear that the road had split into separate paths on its own. He recalled their last phone conversation. She had called him, 'I hear you've had a nikah with another woman.' When he replied, 'But I haven't pronounced talaq to you,' he could feel the weakness in his voice. Nothing after that. *Haughty woman. Or was it self-respect? But the nature of the person determines if it's arrogance or self-respect…I know how she would corner me on this question…dismiss it as tautology. Oh! And when I saw how she thoroughly dominated the morning session, trampling the country's intellectual giants of all hues—the bearded academic celebrities whose experience was reflected by the grand tufts of grey, ash and white facial hair, the scholars of Arabic and Farsi with long white beards that somehow exuded their scholarship, the*

Marxist powerhouses who had swallowed their opponents in debates throughout their long careers, the two traditional Hindu pundits sporting the long tilak on their forehead—before finally catching my eyes and boring them as if I was a helpless prey…I felt like a helpless prey…her focused gaze… damn! All these are deliberate tactics, the director's flourish, cinematic effects, but why didn't I realize it then? Why was I so unable to meet and hold her gaze? Why did I look down and use that file for support? To not meet a person's eyes is to accept defeat, to surrender. Why didn't I get this simple fact then? I was defeated and there was no clearer proof of that than the fact that she became more aggressive after I turned my eyes downward. If only I had met her stare and pierced her gaze with mine and shown that I was ready to accept any question, any challenge…that would've surely put the brakes on her uninterrupted oratory. Damn! What a moment to blank out!

She didn't stop even during the post-lunch session. She cut into the presentation of almost every other speaker. It was very clear to him that nobody in the entire gathering had come as solidly prepared as her. She stared directly into the eyes of the person whose argument she took apart. And she didn't look at him even once. But he was sure that if the crafty chairperson called him out to present, she would definitely turn and look at him. And he would lose again. He had prepared nothing. He was embarrassed and upset and began to feel jittery. He didn't want to be here. Not that his presence really mattered. He had been to countless such meetings and knew that all that was needed was his signature in the attendance sheet. He would get his travel allowance and dearness allowance on the last day of the seminar. He had woken up very early to take the first flight to Delhi and then the heavy lunch was making him drowsy. He got up noiselessly, walked out of the hall as if he was making his way towards the rest room, and then out of the building. He hailed a taxi and said, 'Hotel Janpath.' He looked out the tinted window at the wide, smooth road as tree after manicured tree zoomed past the moving car. *Always smart and intelligent. Unbeatable in debate and logic. She didn't merely work on my story ideas…she took initiative and spent tireless hours…nothing less than perfection. She was a writer every director would die to have. Fluent in both English and Kannada. And fearless. She would argue with me on the location and she usually had the last word on most occasions. Anybody else and I'd have dismissed it as interference…she was inspiration…it was so easy to direct the screenplays she wrote! Zubeida knows how to read and write. But zero confidence. She managed to get a*

certificate saying that she had passed her eighth standard and used it to get a job as a teacher in an Urdu primary school because the school was desperately short of female teachers. She removed the face-cover of her burqa only when she entered class—her idea of freedom. Janaab Sattar Sahib ran a small fruit stall opposite the Shivajinagar bus stand. He was poor but lived with dignity. Never sent any female member of his family out of the house without a burqa and unaccompanied. A modest…well, actually, a small house fenced with a ten-feet-high compound. Ancestral home, said Kisar Ali Khan Sahib who had introduced himself. And met me repeatedly. The pressure came later. Slowly. Increasingly. 'This wouldn't have happened if you had married a pure Muslim girl. Our community wouldn't have allowed your bibi to simply dump you like this. Marry this girl. You've seen how she is…looks resplendent, shining like silver. She'll be a great match for you.' Loneliness had become unbearable. After so many years of marriage my body was used to getting what it wanted…wasn't it scientifically proven that if these needs were ignored, they'd wreck the mind? I could've grazed in the film world…no dearth of available women, but word spreads really quickly there. Everybody knows everybody's story…what did I want? A woman to look after my house and me? A ripe young girl who'd rekindle my youth? I finally gave in, married her…a few hours later it was clear that her eighth-standard primary-school-teacher mind had stagnated right there at eighth standard. She was a good girl—very caring, obedient and respectful. Told me she was ready to quit her job if I wanted her to. Cooks better than the cook and keeps the house in order. And very giving in bed. I feasted every night…on some days, more than once in the same night, after five years of starvation. Then pregnancy! I was old enough to be a grandfather and now, I was about to become a father. What had I done? Feelings of shame and guilt engulfed me. Nazir is thirty-two! I asked her to abort it. But she was stubborn, her womanly instinct to bear a child on the one side and her orthodox upbringing on the other. She grew up with her father's deep faith that family planning was sinful. That man had sired eleven children; five had died in childbirth. She insisted on keeping the baby and I gave in. Actually I didn't have the heart to have it aborted. Her brothers and sisters began to constantly troop into our house and began to stay there for extended periods. Was it all pre-planned? Did Zubeida's parents send Janaab Sattar as the middleman because they figured that getting her married to me was a good way to establish a relationship with a wealthy family? Then it began.

Groceries, eggs, meat, chicken, oil, butter…more and more like I had unlimited supply of money. I barely stopped myself from telling her to ask her sisters to get out of my house. And how she had in that timid tone told—in fact reprimanded me—for staying away from home, for going out for weeks at a stretch for my film shoots. It took me several months before I realized that she was barely literate but pretty adept at manipulation. I decided to give her talaq but what stopped me was pity…for her condition and her upbringing, but mostly because my child was in her belly. Which is when I realized how amazingly profound that proverb was: it's better to box with a sandalwood-seller than to make love to a dung-seller. A well-read, intelligent, creative and financially-independent wife was a dream partner. The contented friendship that she brought was unmatched. Razia! How I missed her…and decided to go to see her…what was that village? Some place near Kunigal. I could've gone there and pacified her. 'We're still husband and wife. I haven't given you talaq. Stay with me. Stay in the flat. Let Zubeida stay there. I'll be with you and I'll give her supplies and some money every month. Plus, she gets her salary. We'll be like before. Just you and me.' But no. Razia wouldn't have agreed. Proud. Damn! I thought of strategies to mollify her, remind her of the times we spent at that hillock at Fergusson in Pune, remind her of the long, sweet nights we had shared over so many years. Whisper endearments. Beseech her. But I knew how she would break it all with a snap: 'Try again, Amir, I've written better dialogues.' There would be no bigger insult…I pulled my car to the left, braked to a halt and stared blankly ahead for a few minutes and then made a U-turn towards Bangalore and away from Kunigal.

'Hotel Janpath, sahib,' the driver's voice came from afar.

Once he was in his room, he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. The air conditioning was soothing but sleep didn't come.

Relentless piercing. Her eyes were like daggers. And the snubbing at lunchtime. Unfeeling. She was still well-read, still creative and still fiercely independent. I'm proud…but how hard is it to show an ounce of humility towards the husband? Hah! That calls for culture. Suddenly I felt good. Bloody bureaucrats! They lack the basic courtesy to send a prior guest list. If I knew she was here I'd have skipped this. I hate this feeling. I'll show them their places. But government officials were by nature arrogant. I can visualize their response. 'We did our duty by sending you the invite. The rest was up to you. We aren't obligated to send you any guest list.'

He lay there and didn't get up to even switch on the light long after the sun had set. He looked at his watch in the darkness because he felt incredibly hungry. 8 p.m. He walked slowly to the bar and restaurant. He felt like drinking hard liquor. He didn't drink every day, he drank only to relax after a hard day of work or when he was feeling low and not more than two pegs. Now he recalled that she had always given him company. He felt furious at this memory. He waved to the waiter, ordered scotch and studied the food menu. The amber liquid warmed his throat and went well with the delicious chicken. He ordered more scotch after dinner and sat there for a long time, savouring the entire experience. A gratified smile formed on his face and he felt very pleasant. When he got up after paying the bill, he experienced a surge of pure physical power. The day-long depression had disappeared. He could think really clearly now. *The bloody bureaucrats I'm sure have put up all the invitees right here. Even her. I'll ask.* He was very polite at the reception counter, 'Razia Begum. She's come to attend the ministry's meeting. Room number please?'

'Ms Razia Begum Querishi. That would be Room 314.'

He thanked the receptionist and walked towards the lift. He was in Room 215. Almost exactly below her's.

He rang the doorbell and waited a minute before the door opened.

It was her. Not a strand of her dense and bountiful hair had fallen. Not a strand was black. She was still wearing the green and saffron sari. She had her reading glasses. In her hand was a book of modest thickness.

'It's me,' he said.

'I know.'

'I need to talk to you.'

'You may come in,' she said, as if she was granting him permission. She pointed to a sofa and once he was inside the room, she walked to the door, bolted it and sat on the sofa opposite his.

He didn't expect it'd be so easy. He had prepared for a tiff of sorts and now he was elated. His self-confidence soared. Suddenly he forgot what he wanted to talk about and began to fumble for something to say. She looked at him plainly.

'I asked for Razia Begum in the reception. That girl said Razia Begum *Querishi* was in Room 314!' his voice was excited.

'Is that supposed to have some special significance?' She realized he was tipsy the moment she saw him almost tottering towards the sofa. Her tone

was neutral.

‘Heheheheh…she didn’t ask for my room number or card. The surname would’ve been a real giveaway! I’m sure she would’ve asked why we were staying separately. Hahahahaha!’ He winked. She didn’t reply. Instead, she hardened her stare. Amir wasn’t scared now. He returned her gaze.

‘The bureaucrat who pays for this room might ask the same question. What do I tell him?’ He flashed a playful smile before continuing, ‘Anyway. Forget them. I want to stay with you. At least tonight.’

‘Did you plan that before coming here?’

‘Why should I? We’re husband and wife.’

‘Which means you have a right over me. Because you haven’t said talaq yet. You just want to keep me. Right?’

‘Right. And I won’t. Ever. Tell me now. I’ll give talaq to Zubeida. Right now! I want you. Only you. Always. Please,’ He got up and in a step, was close to her.

It felt repulsive and a little scary but she summoned her will and said, ‘Amir. Go back to your place. We need to clear some things first.’ He returned to his place.

‘Don’t ever try this again. You know—you’ve shot countless rape scenes—it’s difficult for a man to really rape a woman unless she’s physically *really* very feeble or he has a weapon. And there’s no way somebody as drunk as you can rape someone.’

‘What’re you saying? Do you really think I came here to rape you? I know you’re angry and all but, come on! You’re my bibi. You’ll always be. I’ll never give you talaq. Never. Never. No talaq. I want you. Only you. You. I’ll give her talaq. From here…phone…phone…now. I’ll divorce Zubeida. I want you.’

‘Nobody can force even his wife to have sex. It’s illegal. The fact that we’ve both registered and are staying in separate rooms is proof enough that I’m not interested and that you’ve trespassed into my room.’

‘What nonsense! You seem to have decided that I’ve come here only to rape you!’

‘Yes. Because you’ve repeatedly insisted that you haven’t divorced me. You seem to forget that I can give you talaq as well.’

‘Yeah? No woman has that right…okay, let me ask you theoretically. Which woman has the right to pronounce talaq on her husband?’

‘This country’s Constitution gives me the right to legally quit the religion

which has such a restriction regarding the rules of talaq. I'll file a signed affidavit in court stating that I renounce Islam and that I want to return to the Hindu fold. Amir, I know enough law. I've read the judgement that says that any man or woman who quits her current religion can do so only according to the rules of the religion she or he has married into. But then I'll go to the Supreme Court and raise a stink, saying that you've put me through immense mental torture by marrying another woman when you are still married to me. I'll yell about the unfairness of it all—that you have the right to marry four women at a time at will. I'll question the source, which gives you that right. Think about what that would do to your image.'

'Wh…what? Say that again.' He didn't seem to fully comprehend what she said. When she repeated her words, his face fell. He felt empty again. The same morose emptiness that had lasted throughout the afternoon and until dinner. She was staring at him. He didn't meet her gaze and looked down. After a long time, he got up, walked over and sat close to her. She said nothing. He suddenly held put her hands in his, leaned and whispered, 'I know, I know you're very angry with me because I married again. I understand your anger, I swear I do. But think about it. Doesn't it tell you that I'm lonely without you?'

She softened a little but in a moment collected herself and said, 'What's done is done. You married because you felt like it. But why her? You could've found someone who matched you? Someone who was equal to you in education and accomplishment? What can you share with this girl?'

'You know we don't allow girls to get educated. It's prohibited. Only a few rich and educated families allow their girls to go and get whatever degree or doctorate they want. Who'd want his daughter to be the second wife of an old man like me?'

She felt incredible pity for him when she heard this. Was this his drink talking? Or did he simply pour everything out, considering how emotionally vulnerable he was? Or was it a mix of both? She was unsure. She softened more and gently, affectionately squeezed his hand and said, 'Zubeida. That's her name, right? Send her to school again. Let her go to college after that. Find out what she loves and arrange for intensive coaching in those areas. In about eight to ten years, I'm sure she'll become your equal.'

'Right. And I'll be seventy by then. But that's not the point. No amount of intensive coaching will help someone who's not interested. You have no idea of her abilities.'

‘Hmm.’

She felt bad for him. Her thoughts turned inward. She didn’t let go of his hand. After five minutes, she said, ‘One more thing: modern education is the only way for someone to develop their faculties. If you want your women to grow intellectually to a standard where they can become equal with a man like you, you need to stop feeding them only Islamic teachings in the name of education. But remember, every woman who gets a modern education will demand equality in all aspects of life: social, economic, political, marital and spiritual. She will ask uncomfortable questions. Why must God only be a male? Goddesses are equal in number to gods in Hinduism. And then there are goddesses who are more powerful than gods. Haven’t you heard of the story of the Goddess Chamundeshwari? The gods were powerless to counter the might of the demon Mahisha. They approached Durga, who took the form of Chamundeshwari and killed him in a battle. Pre-Islamic Arabia worshipped numerous female gods but once the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) took over, he banned the worship of female gods and left his followers with just the male Allah. An educated Muslim woman will ask why he banned worship of female gods. And it’s not just the women. Anybody whose mind is shaped by today’s education—which finds discrimination of any sort revolting—will become a feminist. That reminds me. About twenty years ago, I went to some programme organized by the Amateur Women Writers’ Association in Bangalore. A lady read out a short story she had written. It was based on Sita’s trial by fire episode. When Rama asks her to prove her chastity by telling her to jump into the fire and emerge unscathed, Sita asks him to join her because like him, even she wants to find out if he’s been faithful in her absence. This was the lady’s version of trial by fire. We were seven women in that reading session, including me. Another woman stood up and screamed, ‘That’s not enough. Change it. Make Sita hold his scruff and slap him at least four times on both cheeks!’ I told this to show you a small sample of the kind of mindset that works with respect to discrimination of any kind. And this has only increased of late—you’re aware of the kind of literature that’s being churned out about Kunti, Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita and Mandodari. Our feminist writers are depicting these women as balls of fire. You know that, don’t you?’

He said nothing for a long time, and then nodded with a ‘Hmm.’ And she continued, ‘If you give this kind of education freely, openly to the women of your religion, they’ll ask precisely these questions and churn out precisely

this kind of literature. From a purely biological perspective and for reproductive purposes, they'll ask, is the distinction of male and female even necessary? If it is, they'll ask, whose role is more important? And then an entirely different answer will emerge to the question of whether God should be male or female. You know, in my studies over these past five years, I've also done Vedanta. It says that the Ultimate and Eternal Reality called Brahman is neither male nor female. It is genderless. Vedanta texts refer to it in the neuter gender. Even that which is called Ishwara is nothing more than an aspect of Brahman. This world is created out of the primordial cosmic energy contained in Brahman and this cosmic energy is conceptualized as Shakti. And Shakti is a female who gives birth to all creation and nurtures it through time and space. We need to seek refuge in and worship her. See what that means? That God is female. And that which is beyond God is genderless. All our worship through symbols, language, prayers and rituals is meant to finally reach this goddess. Those who are called gods—the males—play a subordinate role to this goddess like the bees that serve the queen bee. When critical enquiry reaches spiritual heights, every feminist becomes a practitioner of Vedanta. Gender difference occurs only at the level of nature and instinct. Vedanta doesn't admit the existence of separate souls for male and female. Are your fellow-religionists prepared to allow such ideas? Amir?'

Silence again. She turned and looked at him. His eyes were heavy with sleep, he had already slipped into an alcohol induced stupor. She felt let down. Her essay-length monologue had completely escaped him. She knew she had spoken spiritedly. She thought she was sharing her insights but it was wasted on him. She felt mildly depressed. Now the weight on her shoulder shook her out of it. Amir had leaned on her. He was dangerously close to sleeping right there on her bed. She got up, caught both his shoulders and shook him.

'Amir! You're very sleepy. Come, I'll take you to your room.'

He muttered something.

'Your room number, Amir!'

'Mmmmmmmmm.'

She put his hand in his trouser pocket, extracted the key and read the room number—215. She put it back in his pocket. Then she put one hand on each of his shoulders and stood him up. She walked him slowly out of her room into the corridor. When they had covered some distance in this manner,

she spotted the bellboy of her floor and signalled to him.

‘Here. Escort this sahib to his room. Take this key.’

‘Yes, madam.’

She stood watching till both of them stepped into the lift.

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When she lay down on the bed, she found she was unable to sleep. The day’s events had deeply shaken her. She was appalled upon discovering the real intent of the seminar. And now Amir’s drunken blabber continued to churn long-buried feelings of emotional turmoil, like waves slapping her relentlessly. She sought solace in the thought that he had married again chiefly in a fit of anger. What did he expect? He deserves that hapless girl. But the churning resurfaced when she recalled his confession that he was lonely without her. With it came the realization that she too was lonely. For a moment she considered what he had said: ‘I’ll give her talaq and stay with you like before.’ It was tempting. Suddenly she felt guilty. If she gave in, she’d never be able to face herself again. Supporting a markedly unjust law that would bring that poor woman to the streets was unthinkable. Even otherwise, she realized that she no longer had the same love for him. She sat up, lay down, changed positions, closed her eyes only to open them again and finally lay on her back and stared at the ceiling. Sleep eluded her and she was glad when dawn broke.

She got up, showered, dressed, finished breakfast and hailed a taxi. She sat in the backseat and looked out of the closed tinted window, at nothing in particular, when a signboard at the corner of a wide road caught her eye—Aurangzeb Road. She was surprised. Then she remembered that there was a road named after Akbar. Was Aurangzeb a historical figure really worth remembering with respect? She couldn’t fathom the mindset of independent India’s ruling elite. Or was it yet another rabbit in the vote-bank hat that dictated that one must equally respect every historical figure? Was it something more sinister? She knew the retort that would ensue: Aurangzeb is a historical reality and it’s our duty to remember him. Then why erase his deeds, equally a historical reality, from school textbooks? She intended to bring this up today at the seminar.

She reached really early. Nobody had arrived yet. As she paced around in the portico, a thought struck her. It was a good idea to stay for a day longer in

Delhi, book a taxi and visit important historical sites in and around the city. The Red Fort, Jama Masjid, Tughlaqabad, Humayun's Tomb and other major and minor Muslim monuments and sites needed deeper study. It would help her further refine the novel's manuscript. She saw a man of about fifty walking directly towards her.

'Namaste. My name is Dr Rajavardhan, reader, history department, Allahabad University. You have no idea how much I loved your gutsy speech yesterday. You're the only man here.'

'Then why didn't you support me yesterday?' she asked him directly without masking the coldness in her voice.

'Didn't you declare yesterday that Muslim rule had emasculated all the men in India?' He laughed at his own joke. He removed a small packet from his pocket, opened it, poured some tobacco on his right palm, added a pinch of white lime to it, rubbed it vigorously with his left thumb, chucked the mixture into his mouth and then, 'You've registered yourself as Razia Begum but I can tell you're not a Muslim by birth.'

'Why do you say that?'

'No one who's a Muslim by birth can even dream of saying the things you said yesterday. You had a love marriage and you converted because otherwise you would've been unable to marry. Am I right? And I'm sorry. I have no right to talk about your personal life.'

She thought about this. *It is likely the professor had told him about me after I left.* She debated asking this man how he knew so much about her personal life but it would be unwise. She turned when she heard some noise —the professor's special car, a privilege the ministry had granted him, had arrived. The doors opened and the professor and a special secretary of the ministry emerged. The secretary quickly made his way towards the hall to supervise the day's arrangements. Dr Rajavardhan walked up to the professor and said, grinning widely, 'Just a second, sir. I need to tell you something…' he paused and then lowered his voice a little and said, 'Palmistry is my hobby. Believe me, I don't do this for money. Now if you give me the honour of showing your palm…' He grabbed the professor's right hand and turned it up without waiting for a reply. He adjusted his glasses a little, bent a bit and studied the palm with great seriousness. He let go of the hand and said, 'So everything adds up to it. From whatever angle I see. You're just a step from getting the highest honour. The highest! In India that means Bharat Ratna. Right, sir?' Dr Rajavardhan now looked at the professor's face directly. The

professor glowed.

‘You really think so? Now I don’t really believe in these things…I mean, palmistry and astrology, all those things. But I don’t want to discourage you and because you’ve read my palm, tell me what else do you see?’

Dr Rajavardhan grinned deliberately, his lips parting slowly, drops of tobacco juice dripping from his mouth. He ignored it and examined the professor’s hand again. It was clear to Lakshmi that he was a master guesser—he would ‘predict’ people’s future through a quick analysis of the person’s behaviour.

It was Lakshmi’s turn in the evening.

‘Madam, can I see your hand?’

‘People who have expectations from future are drawn to astrology. I have no such expectation. Oh, and your guess about my personal life was right. Congratulations! You’re very talented.’

He laughed loudly and said, ‘I have no talent. I overheard a conversation about you yesterday. That’s how I know about your personal life. I knew that you were also a part of the Progressive Movement in the past. And then, lots of folks here know that you converted to Islam just so you could marry. Professor Sastri had included your name in the hope of using you as a powerful votary of their “national integration” project but you did a complete U-turn. You have no idea of the kind of shock you’ve given him. The minister is shocked, too. He gets a report of the proceedings of the conference twice a day. A kind of who-said-what, what’s the general consensus of the gathering…that kind of report. The minister questioned Professor Sastri on his choice of you, a Muslim woman who went against the…ummm…agenda. In his defence, the professor told him about your background, your life, etc.’

His words more than confirmed her suspicion that this assemblage was a carefully-chosen coterie of yes men. She recalled the events of today. Though she knew it was futile to argue with the mindless distortion right in her presence, she couldn’t resist interrupting the speakers at regular intervals. ‘…this is not what the primary sources say! It’s not scientific to discard what Muslim court historians have themselves recorded…unless we accept the bitterest truths of history, we’ll be unable to learn the true lessons that history is ready to teach us…Hindu society has genuinely admitted Manu’s mistakes, has apologized for those mistakes and has for the past hundred years been correcting them. This country has made it illegal for anybody to discriminate against Dalits and backward sections of the Hindu society. They’re given

legal and police protection. Discrimination is punished pretty severely. They've been allowed to become priests at temples. Why aren't we allowing the same opportunity for the Muslim society to reform itself? Reform begins with education, with understanding the mistakes that have been committed. And this understanding comes from a factual reading of history as it happened.'

To this, a clean-shaven professor had asked her in a very polite tone, 'Let's accept that what you say about the atrocities of Muslim rulers is true. However, is it right to use that as a reason to victimize our Muslim brethren today? To fan hatred against them? Will that achieve national integration?'

'The purpose of reading history is not to deride or vilify anybody. And it shouldn't be. At best, the study of history should help us to honestly, dispassionately understand the rights and wrongs of people we regard as our ancestors and use those lessons to shape our present and future. And that involves looking at the truth without colouring it; that involves utter honesty —to come face-to-face with the truth and seminars like this are preventing that from happening. You're right. Today's Muslims aren't responsible for what Muslim kings did in the past. But unless they honestly accept the truth that yes, their ancestors did commit those atrocities, it'll simply mean that they continue to justify those atrocities. As recent as…kind of in our own times, the Japanese openly, honestly expressed their regret over what they had done to Korea. What does that tell us? And then we have the example of Germany, which not only apologized but has sworn never to commit the horrible crime that the Nazis had perpetrated—you know what message that sends? It says: we do not subscribe to the crimes of our ancestors, we're different, we're human and we're decent. And you good people here, you aren't letting the Muslims of this country develop this sort of moral courage. Realization—that's what accepting bitter truths brings us. Realization comes when we honestly accept the mistakes of the past and that automatically builds the responsibility that will prevent us from repeating those same mistakes. You will better succeed at achieving national integration and brotherhood if they're built on the foundation of truth. Like the Hindu society has acknowledged the mistakes of Manu. Right?'

The chairperson's refrain-like interjections, which she had duly ignored, were equally frequent: 'Thank you for sharing your viewpoint. The audience has heard you. Please allow others to share theirs.' A corner of her mind had told her that the professor would've long thrown her out of the session if only

his daughter was not Nazir's begum.

~

After she was back in Narasapura, she began to read material directly related to the seminar's discussion topic—specific histories, primary sources and histories written by court historians. Then she began to prepare a list of citations. The idea was to print out copies of this citation and present it at the next seminar.

A month later, she received a letter from Dr Rajavardhan.

> My Salaams to Madam Razia,
>
> I write to you to express my delight at the prospect of meeting you again. I trust you will be attending the second seminar scheduled to be held on the 24th, 25th and 26th of this month. This time, I intend to talk to you in great detail about some aspects related to history. I trust you're keeping well.
>
> Sincerely yours,
> Dr Rajavardhan

No invitation had reached her. He couldn't have written this before receiving the actual invite letter. She was surprised. Then it dawned on her and she felt disturbed. Was this the way in which things worked in a country whose national motto was Satyameva Jayate—Truth Alone Triumphs?

~

She remained in a disturbed state for two full weeks. Then curiosity gnawed at her. She grew desperate to learn what happened at the second seminar. The obvious option was to write to Dr Rajavardhan but she decided against it. A written record could always prove risky. Telephone was a better option. She searched for the card he had given her on the last day of the first seminar. His home phone number was printed on it. Narasapura still didn't have a single phone line, despite the government's day-to-day promise of connecting all of

India. She alighted at Kunigal the next morning and called him from a public booth. After four rings, he came on the line.

'Raziaji! Congratulations! You have single-handedly changed the course of history writing in India!' he said effusively.

'I…err…can you please explain?'

'Please stay on the line for a second. I'll spit out this darned tobacco and join you.' She heard the sound of the receiver being placed down. After about a minute, she heard him clear his throat, 'You know, casteist historians…no, no make that communal historians…you know, communal historians are those who call Muslim kings religious fanatics…so these communal historians hold up Aurangzeb as the best example to prove the fact that Muslim kings were religious zealots. But then, you know, he was not a zealot…he was tolerant, secular…or…well, that's what the folks in this seminar concluded. A panel of experts has been set up to conduct research on him and they'll publish a series of articles, papers…a couple of books, which will portray him as a strict, but able and secular ruler. Wait for two years. Aurangzeb will change before our eyes.' He chuckled, 'Oh! And do you know how the Kashi Vishwanath temple was destroyed? So Aurangzeb was on his way to Kashi with his entourage, which included Hindu kings and their respective wives. When they were nearing Benares, the Hindu kings requested Aurangzeb to allow them to stay and worship Lord Vishwanath. Now Aurangzeb was not merely tolerant of other religions, he actively encouraged the beliefs of people of all religions. And so he not only granted their request but made elaborate security arrangements for them. Battalions of soldiers were stationed all through a distance of five miles leading up to Benares. The wives of the Hindu kings took their holy bath in Ganga and entered the Vishwanath temple. They finished their puja and came out of the temple. All except one queen… are you there?'

'I'm listening. Please continue,' she said.

'Oh! I thought the line got cut. You must make some sound so I know you're there. Heh heh…'

'Okay.'

'Okay. So all except one queen came out of the temple. A detailed search for the missing queen was launched. They combed every corner of the temple but failed to find her. When the badshah learnt of this, he was furious. Now he sent his top-ranking officers to search for her. These officers tapped and shook every idol until they discovered that a life-size Ganesha statue

engraved in a wall was slightly loose. They pushed it hard and it slid back horizontally and revealed steps that led to an underground passage. They went down the passage and there, they finally discovered the missing queen. She had been raped and she was weeping continuously. This underground passage was directly below the Vishwanath temple's lingam. The Hindu kings were infuriated and pressurized the badshah to find the rogue and punish him severely.

'As an emperor who preached and practised austerity and settled for nothing less than absolute purity in religion, Aurangzeb instantly understood the angst of his Hindu kings. Their most sacred temple had been defiled. And the culprit could've been none other than the mahant, the head priest in charge of the Vishwanath temple. Nobody else had access to the sanctum sanctorum. So he ordered that the lingam be shifted, the temple razed and the mahant imprisoned. This shameful historical episode equally shows the kind of rot that had set into Hinduism. As we speak, our historians are busy finding material that will adorn him in this role…'

Lakshmi interrupted him. 'Sure, he razed that temple because it was now defiled. So what explains the fact that he used the defiled materials of the destroyed temple in building the holy mosque? What exact kind of defilement took place in Mathura's Keshavaraya temple? What fiction will they write about the destruction of the temple that stood in front of the Udaipur palace? And what about the hundred and seventy-two temples in and around Udaipur? And the sixty-three temples in Chittor? And what about the sixty-six in Amber? What will they say about the *Masir-e-Alamgiri* that records destruction after destruction of temples?'

'Oh, you have no idea! When you have unlimited government funding and a stubborn will to impose an ideological version of history, the imagination automatically becomes fertile. You can spin any fantasy you want.'

'But didn't you oppose this nonsense in the seminar?'

'Raziaji, these concoctions won't ever come up as discussion topics in any seminar. Carefully-chosen members of the inner circle craft these creations. Then they are slowly…almost casually slid into the public domain. Like-minded folks pick them up on cue and project them as authentic truths.' He laughed. 'Scotch helps, madam. They thought I was one of them when they included me in that discussion about Aurangzeb.'

16

All major publications featured reports about the National Integration Seminar. English newspapers plucked the juicy bits of the professor's inaugural and closing address and published them as centre-page pieces. Other speakers got their due share of publicity. Lakshmi's name was conspicuously missing. It was as if she had not only not attended the seminar; it was more like she didn't exist. Editorials, opinion pieces, invited articles, syndicated columns and letters to the editor read alike. Only the words were different. The same refrain she was now used to, and she had once been part of: the British cabal of divide and rule created a deep mistrust between Hindus and Muslims who had lived in a perfect spirit of brotherhood for centuries. The cabal was hugely successful because there were some historians who still parroted the same lies. They didn't want to accept the truth that Muslim kings had ruled in perfect accordance with Prophet Mohammed's lofty precept of Universal Brotherhood. Unless such untruths were weeded out, no meaningful national integration was possible. It made for nauseating reading and it worried her. She concluded that the nation's collective intellect was infected with a mad virus.

From then on, she began to comb newspapers every day and found that although their frequency began to decrease, such pieces made their appearance from time to time. She couldn't spot a single article that showed an alternate or opposing view. After a month, Lakshmi decided to write that opposing view. She wrote a long essay that opened with her visit to the seminar at Delhi and the questions she asked there and how she didn't receive even one convincing and factually correct response. She went to Bangalore, got it typed out and made copies and sent one to a widely-circulated English daily and one to a Kannada daily, which prided itself for its 'courageous journalism'.

A week passed, then two, then three, and then four. Nothing. Neither paper published it. She didn't get even a line from either editor 'regretting our

inability to publish'. She wrote a letter to each of them 'seeking an explanation as to why you haven't published a contrary opinion' and sent it through registered post.

Still no response.

She went to Bangalore and met the resident editor of the English daily. She knew Anandan from her days as a film-maker. He greeted her warmly and ordered Coke. She cut the small talk and came directly to the point.

'Oh?' he said, with open-mouthed surprise, 'I…I don't really know. I don't know. I mean, I guess the sub-editor didn't run it.'

'Sure. Let's call him and find out. This isn't trivial. I can't just let it go like this,' she said in a cold tone.

'You do realize it doesn't look nice to subject him to questioning in the presence of outsiders.'

'Fine then. Get a copy of my essay and read it now. I'll wait. If you don't have a copy…here, take this,' she opened her bag and placed a bunch of papers on his desk.

The split-second change in his expression told her that he knew he was cornered.

'Please leave it here. I'm…awfully busy now. I'll read it. I promise you,' he said. Desperation had now seeped into his voice.

'All right then. Let me know when I should meet you again…and let me make it clear that I'm not in the least interested to see my name in print. This is more than me just wanting to have my writing published. It's something that everybody needs to know, *must* know. A few years of solid research have gone in behind this piece. Don't treat this lightly.'

'These are policy decisions, ma'am. Not in my control. The head office decides this kind of thing. Don't ask me questions which I don't have an answer to.' He lifted his hands and spread them wide apart, his palms facing the ceiling, a gesture of helplessness.

'Then give me the address of your head office,' she demanded.

'With pleasure,' he said and handed her a card.

She sent a copy of her essay with a covering letter to the paper's head office. No response from there as well.

Then she went to the office of the Kannada daily. The editor greeted her very spiritedly and launched into a long verbal tour down the proverbial memory lane. Why did you leave the city? Are you fascinated with that village…what's it called again? We miss you…the entire art world of

Bangalore misses you. Such talent! Five years. Very long time. New trends in theatre. New stars. Oh sorry…I didn't mean to lower your dignity by calling you a star but still… She smiled and nodded and replied in monosyllables as appropriate. The conversation suddenly turned personal.

'You know, you and Amir shouldn't have separated. I'm sorry. I mean, it's not just me. Everybody out here is feeling bad for you. If he had to marry, why a burqa girl? Where was the dearth of intelligent women? He's become like…like withdrawn after that. Well, who can ask him personal questions if he's unwilling to open up?'

'Didn't the Women's Lib folks tear their lungs out? I mean, polygamy, injustice, and the rest?' she asked.

'You know how it is. Minorities. Nobody opens their mouth. Creative deafness. And shall I tell you why you've come here?' He paused and gave her an almost mischievous but knowing look, and said, 'You've come here to ask me why I didn't run your piece. Am I right? That's a piece of masterly work. I can imagine the kind of back-breaking effort you've put in. And I'm scared. I can't publish it. I *won't.* They may mob my office. They may pelt stones, smash the furniture and attack my staff and me. They may set fire to this place or pour petrol on our vans en route and light a matchstick. Anything can happen. Hell, they might even murder *me.* Even if none of this happens, I'll lose my job for sure. I'll be fired for irresponsibility: as an editor, wasn't I aware of the consequences of publishing certain kinds of articles? Like I said, I can't risk it. Then there's the ruling party that keeps an eye open to monitor precisely this kind of writing and the papers that publish them. If it decides to make trouble for us, believe me, it can in a million ways. You can send your essay to any paper: I guarantee you, every editor *will* think like me.'

What kind of democracy are we living in? Freedom of research, expression…freedom of the press is restricted. Fear. Worrying thoughts.

She thanked him and left and reached Narasapura in the evening and thought hard. By now she had read everything in her father's library, as well as the books she had bought. There was plenty of additional material in the world and she could begin reading them, but what was the point? It would only mean collecting more evidence but it wouldn't bring any change in mainstream society. She could write a history book but she had no enthusiasm. She decided to polish her novel one last time and publish it.

~

It took her less than three weeks to finish the novel. It was more a novella than a full-fledged novel. She got it typed and sent the manuscript separately to four publishers. Her fame as a film-maker helped her a little. They had heard her name and welcomed her manuscript with open arms and read it with genuine interest. Their feedback was the same: it's a superb piece of work but we can't publish it. They'll create a massive ruckus. They might burn our shops and harm us physically. Or the government may ban it. Sorry, but we can't publish this. You write something else. We promise to publish it without delay.

'I'll pay for the paper, printing and binding. If it sells, you can pay me back. If there's an untoward incident, it'll be my loss.'

They were stubborn in their refusal.

She seethed.

I'm a bloody artist. I'm a goddamn writer who's written a new novel. I don't need to be scared of this voiceless terrorism that prevents them from publishing my creative work.

She walked into what she thought was a good printing press and made enquiries about the rate. The owner said it would cost thirty thousand rupees to print one thousand copies. The sum also included binding. She paid him some advance and returned to Narasapura.

The printer delivered the books on schedule. She sent a review copy each to major dailies and periodicals with a covering letter requesting them to review it. She sent honorary copies to well-known intellectuals and academics requesting their feedback. Then she approached three popular bookstores and gave hundred copies to each and told them to give her money if her books sold.

No feedback came. Nobody even wrote a card or called her to acknowledge that they had received her book. She spent her days feeling morose and upset at the intellectual conspiracy behind this silent treatment.

And then it came. In the form of a longish review in the Sunday supplement of a widely-circulated Kannada newspaper.

A NOVEL THAT BETRAYS THE NATION

When this great nation was partitioned in 1947, our brothers who

> stayed back here out of love for their motherland became India's minorities. At the outset, this novel seems to have been written solely with the intent of hurting their sentiments and to provoke hatred against them. In some parts of the novel, the provocation is so grave that it might inflame the passions of certain elements of the society to inflict physical violence against our innocent brothers, who are being victimized for no fault of theirs. This novel simply exposes the stink in the rotten mind of its author, Lakshmi alias Razia Begum. It oozes the pus of irrational hatred for Islam, page after page, when the whole world knows that the meaning of the word 'Islam' is 'peace'. But the author has characterized Islam as a terrorist religion, thereby insulting the beliefs of our minorities. We don't fail to notice the other sinister goal that she has tried but failed to accomplish: that of whitewashing the atrocities of the hierarchical Hindu society, which Manu established five thousand years ago.
>
> More than anything, the author has abused the Constitution itself. In the garb of exercising her right to free expression, she has penned a dangerous book—which carries serious literary pretensions—that has immense potential to inflame communal hatred. This is a hazardous book and if it is not banned immediately, the government of the day will be answerable to the ugly consequences that are sure to follow.
>
> —A Reviewer

The reviewer had not used his or her real name. Lakshmi knew the type. They were two-bit people who lent their shoulders in the service of ideology and so their real names didn't actually matter. The abusive review didn't disturb her. She thought it was good in a way. At least word would spread that such a novel existed. In its wake, she began to feel a little worried at the real prospect of a book ban. If it was indeed banned, she had no idea what she could do about it. Today was a Sunday. Government offices and bookstores would be closed. She decided to go to Bangalore tomorrow and visit those bookstores to check how her novel was doing.

Then she thought about the review. It was not really a review. It had no word about the plot or subject or technique or prose, and it completely omitted mentioning elaborate historical evidences she had provided. It was just a continuous stream of vicious prosaic attack aimed at the author, a form

of cheap, street-level political pamphleteering. For some reason, she recalled her past life. If life hadn't been different since her father's death, if she hadn't come here, she would have written a review for such a book more or less along these lines.

She read her novel again and didn't find any major flaw. Most historical situations in the novel were accompanied by footnotes, but not all details had references to primary sources and citations. She regretted the fact that she hadn't thought of providing an extensive bibliography at the end of the book. It wasn't still too late. She could quickly draw up a bibliography and give it as a supplement.

~

A police jeep braked to a halt in front of her house that evening. A sub-inspector and five constables emerged from it. A couple of minutes later, a truck stood a few metres behind the jeep. About ten constables alighted from it.

It was clear why they had come. So the book ban was being enforced at lightning speed. She stood there not knowing what to do and tried to think of her situation like an outsider. This was yet another new experience.

The sub-inspector walked up to her and said, 'Are you Lakshmi alias Razia Begum?'

She nodded.

'We have orders from the government to seize all copies of your book. Kindly cooperate.'

Without waiting for her response, he signalled to the constables who rushed in and began their search operation. They combed the house thoroughly looking out for spaces behind utensils where it could be innocently concealed. They climbed the attic and they looked under the bed and pillows.

It was after some time that the sub-inspector noticed the bundles in the courtyard. Six hundred copies in bundles of twenty. Each bundle was affixed with a sticker with the name of the novel printed on it. He ordered his three constables to put them in the truck.

Then the sub-inspector entered her study, looked briefly around the room and shouted, 'Take them all!' Constables crowded into the modest room, opened the cupboards and pulled the books out, and grabbed some six or

seven books at a time, as if they were hugging them.

‘Stop this now!’ Lakshmi screamed and blocked the door. ‘One, you haven’t showed me the seizure order. Two, the order is to seize the copies of the novel I wrote. Not these. These are really old books, some older than fifty years. Please leave them as they were.’

‘Madam, we’ve been ordered to bring all the books that we find here. It’s not our responsibility to categorize them. We do as we’re told. You can file an application with the court and get them categorized,’ he said coolly and signalled something to a constable. In a second, the constable had gripped her shoulder and forcibly moved her out of the way.

It was all over in a few minutes. Her house was emptied of all books, which now lay rudely scattered in the truck. The vast collection left no standing place for the policemen. A few of them stood on the books nonchalantly.

She watched them without emotion and a while later became contemplative. *These constables come from a culture that treats books as Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning. If your feet accidentally touched even a piece of paper, you would touch your eyes in a gesture of asking forgiveness from the goddess. Forget culture, didn’t these guys have even the basic decency to treat books properly?*

The jeep left first, then the truck. Everything had been seized—histories, travel accounts, primary sources, her father’s notes and reference material. Recovering them would mean spending a few decades running around courts. Even if she managed to recover them in the end, they would be badly damaged and unusable. This brought a scary thought to her mind. It was a very real possibility that they would hunt for copies of these books in libraries across India and then destroy them all.

She couldn’t sleep that night. Feelings of helplessness, sadness and fear engulfed her. Her breathing and heartbeat had gone out of control. Her state was similar to that of the protagonist whom she had created—his testicles were smashed. His experience was now hers. She thought of ways to fight this suppression of freedom of inquiry, thought and expression. It was impossible not to fight this injustice. Then she heard the sound of the rooster.

~

She dragged herself out of bed, had a bath and ate some ragi rotti with

coconut chutney for breakfast. Instead of coffee she drank a bowl of curd. It worked. She began to feel drowsy. She went to the study and lay down on her father's bed. The sleep that slowly set in felt very good.

After a few minutes, she felt Lakshmamma jabbing her shoulder.

'Amma, somebody has come looking for you. He has come in a car. He says it's very urgent. I told him you're sleeping but he insisted that I wake you. He's acting like a madman.' Lakshmi took a long time to return to reality. She had fallen into a really deep sleep.

When she came to the courtyard, she saw a brand new car gleaming in the mid-morning sun. Amir was sitting on the portico. She was stunned and curious but before she could react, he came up to her quickly and whispered, 'It's urgent. You must listen to me…can we talk here?'

'Come in,' she said.

When they were alone in the study, she pointed to a chair and gestured at him to sit. He didn't sit. He quickly looked behind him once and then around the room and then said in a very low tone, 'I'll tell you the rest later on the way. The government has issued an arrest warrant in your name. You need to escape before the cops come here. We'll get a good lawyer and get an anticipatory bail directly from the high court. If you're arrested, getting a bail might take days, weeks, even months. I suspect the idea is to let you rot in jail so that they can keep piling cases on you. They'll accuse you of destroying communal harmony. Then they'll accuse you of attempting to destroy the social fabric of the nation…and so on. Pack clothes for three to four days. We won't take the usual Kunigal–Bangalore highway. We'll take the village roads and get to Magadi and then to Bangalore. Stay at a friend's place… somebody you can really trust. Don't ever get out of the house. I'll arrange for the anticipatory bail.'

She hurriedly packed some clothes and toiletries, went to the kitchen and told Lakshmamma that she was going to Tumkur for court work. 'I don't know when I'll be back. If somebody asks you—even if the police asks you —tell them I'm not in town. Tell them that I never tell you where I go. If they insist, tell them that it is bad manners for a servant to ask such questions of the master.'

She sat beside Amir in the front seat. When the car reached the Narasapura bus stand, she said, 'Take a right. We will reach a village after five miles—Doddaghatta. Take a left from there. The rest of the journey to Bangalore from there is through villages. We'll be completely out of sight

from the main roads. Don't worry.'

A strange sense of confidence had come over her. Thoughts began to form clearly now.

They'll arrest me. Then what? Actually that'll add to my strength. I'll fight through satyagraha. I'll fast until death. She thought about the kind of men and women whose lives she had studied in these five years. She thought about the kind of men and women she had created in her novel. Her own arrest didn't seem so frightening in comparison.

Neither said a word. After Amir turned left at Doddaghatta, she remembered something. *Why did he come here like this? Dramatic… sudden…and overwhelmingly affectionate after all that has happened?* She turned and looked at his face fully. He had been glancing at her from the corner of his eyes from time to time. And now their eyes met.

'I know what you want to say…very bad roads. I need to focus on driving. Let's get to a decent road. We'll stop somewhere and I'll tell you everything. You know how amazing our cops are. We can talk as long as we want. They'll never come this way.'

She nodded, then touched his shoulder tenderly.

After about a mile of slow and bumpy driving, he carefully pulled the car to the right and entered the mud track that led to a vast grove. He stopped the car in the middle of the grove and turned the engine off. Neither said anything for a long time. Then Amir spoke.

'That night in your room… I was drunk…I…' He paused, looked at her fully in the face before continuing, 'In the morning, I could recall most of the conversation we had. I woke up very late the next day and debated whether I should come to the seminar. Frankly, I was scared to face you but I decided not to let you intimidate me. I came. You…ignored me. At least that's what I thought. As the seminar progressed and people began to beat you down again under the excuse of propriety, I couldn't help but admire your guts. You faced them all alone! And your scholarship! I don't know when my admiration turned to a kind of respect that I can't define. I wanted to butt in and ask them to shut up if they couldn't refute your arguments, but I didn't because I couldn't bring myself to speak in front of all those people, and most of all in the presence of Professor Sastri, who was the government's representative. I wanted to bow down to you right there. You're right. Every word you said there *is* backed by solid evidence. You've earned your scholarship. You own it. I…fell in love with you again.'

She looked at him with a straight face but said nothing.

'No. Not the romantic kind of love…not the sort is that shown in films but *understanding*. A kind of bond that I never felt before that seminar. The kind of love that happens without completely understanding a woman's intelligence isn't what I mean. What I mean is the kind of feeling that comes…that *should* come in every man's life where he feels proud of his woman, where his love is elevated to worship. I felt that. For you. I wanted to come to your room again that evening to tell this to you this but I was scared. And I learnt that you weren't invited to the second seminar only after I reached Delhi. You know how the government is. They've commissioned me to do another set of documentaries. It's very lucrative. I make 75 per cent profit from each film. That's how I bought this new car. Anyway, I kept thinking about what you told me that night. There's nothing I can share with a woman who is no way my equal. I don't mean to be snobbish… You've been on my mind. I wanted to come and see you after I returned to Bangalore but I was buried under work.'

A strong wind blew. He turned away from her face and looked around. The weather was perfect to savour the breeze out in the open grove.

'Let's sit there on that bench,' he said and opened the door on his side without waiting for her response.

When they were seated next to each other, he said, 'I read the supplement yesterday after waking up. You know Venkat Rao?'

'That film journalist?'

'Yes. He took my interview some time back. He said they would run it in the Sunday supplement. When I opened it, I saw the review of your novel and I was a little surprised, shocked. I didn't even know you were writing a novel. I'm sure you've read it. The review, I mean.'

'Yes. I get three Kannada papers and one English.'

'Is that piece of dung even a review? I thought some insane bastard had written it but the language is what got me thinking. I mean, the novel definitely had something to invite that kind of abuse. No bookstores were open. I called your assistant, Mohan Kumar, the self-proclaimed die-hard fan of Kannada literature.' He smiled a little. 'He said, "Sir, I've already read it. I have the book with me. It might hurt you." I said I didn't care and asked him to send it across. As I read it, I felt…I don't know…I was confused, angry, hurt and surprised. I felt it was incredible that such things had actually happened. Although I didn't want to believe it, I knew it was the truth—all

those footnotes, first-hand records of the sultans and badshahs and travellers' accounts can't be made up. Your book made me want to read at least some of those but I didn't know where I could find them.

'I got the news that evening on TV. "Popular screenwriter Razia begum's novel has deeply hurt the sentiments of a certain community who have taken to the streets to express their protest. Mild rioting has been reported on MG Road since morning. Business establishments and state transport buses have been stoned. A few cases of arson have been reported. The government has managed to quickly bring the situation under control. It has also announced a ban on the novel and according to the latest reports from the home ministry the police have been dispatched for the task. The community has also demanded the immediate arrest of the novelist."'

'I was scared as hell for your safety and called the DIG and told him who I was. I think that carried enough weight.' He grinned. 'He gave me a brief report in order to, I think, impress me. He said his police force had already returned with the author's entire library including copies of the offensive novel. He said he was confident that the riots would completely stop tomorrow. I asked him about the demand for your arrest. He said he wasn't in a position to say any more than this. I thanked him and after I put the phone down, I knew that he had just confirmed the TV news. You would be arrested. I just couldn't sleep after that. When I closed my eyes, I could see you battling it out in the seminar. I could hear you recite the names of primary sources. I recalled that night…we were sitting like this on the swing and your legs were strumming mine when you passionately argued with me about Tipu Sultan. I felt like reading the books you've cited in your novel. You said your father had bought them all with his own money. And now they're gone and once the cops seize them, they're gone forever.'

When she looked at his face, he detected a glint of quiet understanding. They got up and walked towards the car.

When they were on the way, she asked, 'I'm curious. Who do you think wrote that review?'

'You tell me your guess first. I'll tell you mine.'

'Could it be Professor Sastri?'

'I think so too. Maybe he hasn't written it himself. He has no shortage of supply of willing pawns. Or it could be someone in the newspaper. A review like that would boost its circulation like nothing else. If I know him well, he wouldn't have written it himself. He's shrewd. He knows his daughter is

married to your son and he knows that Nazir loves you intensely. The professor won't ever allow himself to be implicated in anything.'

They journeyed for a long time silently. He suddenly slowed down and looked at her as if remembering something, and said, 'Do you remember the names of the books that the cops seized? If you can recall the publishers' names as well, it would be a bonus.'

'Why?'

'Make a catalogue of those books. It'll make our case stronger when we file an application to get them released. Add a disclaimer indicating that your catalogue is not exhaustive.'

She thought about this for a while. It made sense and opened up another possibility. She said, 'It's not just about getting the books released. I can argue in court that if the ban on my book is justified then all these books need to be banned as well because my novel cites these books as evidence.'

They reached Bangalore late in the evening. Amir dropped her off at her friend Nanjundappa's house. After dinner, she began making the catalogue from memory.

1.	Abu-L-Fazl Allami	The *A-IN-I-Akbari*, tr. H. Blochmann, vols I, II & III,1927, rpt., Delhi: DK Publishers & Distributors Pvt. Ltd, 1949.
2.	Abu-L-Fazl	*The Akbar Nama*, tr. H. Beveridge, vols I & II, 1902, rpt., Delhi: DK Publishers & Distributors Pvt. Ltd, 1939.
3.	A.K. Priolkar	*The Goa Inquisition* with accounts given by Dr Dellon and Dr Buchanan, 1961, rpt., Voice of India, 1991.
4.	*Alberuni's India*	ed. Edward C. Sachau, vols. I and II, 1910, rpts, 1989, 1993, 1996.
5.	*Babur-Nama*	tr. Annette S. Beveridge, 2 vols., 1921, rpts, 1989, 1997.
6.	Sir H.M. Elliot and John Dowson	*The History of Indiaas Told by Its* Own Historians, 8 vols. (These eight volumes contain the translations of contemporary accounts left by

		Muslim historians in the service of the Muslim kings of their period and describe in detail the invasion of India, the battles they fought and how they administered their empire.)
7.	David Frawley and Navaratna S. Rajaram	*Islam in Today's World (The Myth and the Truth)*, Bangalore: Naimisha Research Foundation.
8.	David Frawley S.V. Seshagiri Rao and Navaratna S. Rajaram	*Crusade in India: Christianity's Struggle for Survival in the Post-Colonial World*, Bangalore: Naimisha Research Foundation.
9.	Harsh Narain	*Jizyah and the Spread of Islam*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 1990.
10.	*The Islamic Trilogy Series*	*Mohammed and the Unbelievers*, vol. I; *The Hadith for the Unbelievers*, vol. II; *A Simple Koran: Readable and Understandable*, vol. III; *An Abridged Koran*, vol. IV; *Mohammed, Allah, and The Jews*, vol. V, The Foundational Doctrine; *Mohammed, Allah, and The Christians*, vol. VI, The Foundational Doctrine; *Mohammed, Allah, and Hinduism*, vol. VII, The Foundational Doctrine; *Mohammed, Allah, and The Intellectuals*, vol. VIII, The Foundational Doctrine, Centre for the Study of Political Islam, CSPI Publications.
11.	Ishwar Sharan	*The Myth of Saint Thomas and The Mylapore Shiva Temple*, Voice of India, 1991.
12.	Jadunath Sarkar	*A Short History Of Aurangzib*, 1930, rpts, Orient Longman, 1954, 1962, 1979; *Shivaji and his Times*, 1919, rpts, Orient Longman, 1973, 1992,

1997; *A History of Jaipur*, 1939–40;. *Military History of India*, 1960, rpt, Orient Longman.

13. James Todd — *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, 2 vols., 1829, London: Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd, rpt, Rupa & Co., 1997.

14. John F. Richards — *The New Cambridge History of India: The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1993.

15. Koenraad Elst — *Ayodhya and After: Issues Before Hindu Society*; *Negationism in India: Concealing the Record of Islam*; *Psychology of Prophetism*; *Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid: A Case Study in Hindu-Muslim Conflict*, Voice of India; *The Saffron Swastika (The Notion of Hindu Fascism)* vol. 1 & II, Voice of India; *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, A True Aryan*; *Indigenous Indians: Agastya to Ambedkar*.

16. K.M. Panikkar — *Malabar and The Portuguese*, 1929, rpt, Voice of India, 1997.

17. K.S. Lal — *The Mughal Harem*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan; *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan; *Indian Muslims: Who are they*, Voice of India; *Theory and Practice of Muslim State in India*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan; *The Legacy of Muslim Rule in India*, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

18. Maasir-I-Alamgiri — *Saqi Must'ad Khan*, English tr. Jadunath Sarkar, 1947, rpt, Calcutta:

		Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1986.
19.	Navaratna S Rajaram	*The Politics of History (Aryan Invasion Theory and the Subversion of Scholarship)*, Voice of India; *Nationalism and Distortions in Indian History*, Bangalore: Naimisha Research Foundation; *A Hindu View of the World: Essays in the Intellectual Kshatriya Tradition*, Voice of India; *Profiles in Deception (Ayodhya and the Dead Sea Scrolls)*, Voice of India; *Hindutva and The Nation*, Bangalore: Naimisha Research Foundation; *Aryan Invasion*: *Historical Theory of Political Myth*, Vigil (A Public Opinion Forum), Madras.
20.	Navaratna S. Rajaram, David Frawley	*Vedic Aryans and The Origins and of Civilization (A Literary and Scientific Perspective)*, Foreword by Klaus K. Klostermaier.
21.	R.C. Majumdar	*The History and Culture of the Indian People*, 11 vols, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
22.	Samuel P. Huntington	*The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order*, Penguin.
23.	Suhas Majumdar	*Jihad* (The Islamic Doctrine of permanent war), Voice of India.
24.	Swapan Dasgupta, Rama Jois, Arun Jaitley, S.P. Gupta, Koenraad Elst, Arun Shourie	*The Ayodhya Reference*, Supreme Court Judgement and Commentaries.
25.	Shrikant G. Talageri	*Aryan Invasion Theory and Indian Nationalism*, Voice of India; *The Aryan Invasion Theory: A Reappraisal*, Foreword by S.R. Rao.

		Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.
26.	Sita Ram Goel	*History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* (AD 304–1996) Voice of India. *Hindu Temples—What Happened to Them*, vol. 1, A Preliminary Survey; The Islamic Evidence, vol. 11; *The Calcutta Quran Petition*, Voice of India, *How I Became A Hindu* (Reprinted with a postscript), Voice of India; *Freedom of Expression* (Secular Theory versus Liberal Democracy), Voice of India; *Genesis and Growth of Nehruism*, vol. 1, Commitment to Communism; *Catholic Ashrams*: *Sannyaasins or Swindlers?*, Voice of India; *Papacy: Its Doctrine and History*; *Stalinist 'Historians' Spread the Big Lie*; *Perversion of India's Political Parlance*; *Hindu Society Under Siege*; *Muslim Separatism: Causes and Consequences*; *Pseudo-Secularism: Christian Missions and Hindu Resistance*; *Defence of Hindu Society*; *Heroic Hindu Resistance to Muslim Invaders (AD 636–1206)*; *Hindus and Hinduism: Manipulation of Meanings*; *India's Secularism: New Name for National Subversion*, tr. Yashpal Sharma.
27.	Stanley Lane-Poole	*Aurangzib and the Decay of Mughal Empire*, 1890, rpt, 1930, 1990.
28.	Wheeler Thackston, ed., tr., annotated	*The Jahangirnama*: *Memoirs of Jahangir*, New York: Oxford University Press.
29.	Alexander Rogers, tr., Henry	*The Tuzuk-I-Jahangiri*: *The Memoirs*

	Beveridge, ed.	*of Jahangir*, 2 vols,1909–14.
30.	Gul Badan Begum	*The History of Humayun (Humayun Nama)*, tr. Annette S. Beveridge with introduction, notes and illustrations, 1902.
31.	William Irvine	*The Army of the Indian Moghuls: Its Organization and Administration*.

All the books cited earlier extensively dealt with the destruction of the Kashi Vishwanath temple. Lakshmi had used these books as references for the episode of the temple's destruction in her novella.

There were many other books that she had used in her five-year-long research, whose names she started jotting down as well.

32.	Anwar Shaikh	*Islam*: *the Arab Imperialism*; *Islam, Sex and Violence,* Cardiff: The Principality Publishers, UK, 1999.
33.	Arun Shourie	*Eminent Historians: Their Technology, Their Line, Their Fraud*, New Delhi: ASA; *A Secular Agenda,* New Delhi: ASA; *The World of Fatwas or The Shariat in Action,* New Delhi: ASA; *Indian Controversies: Essays on Religion in Politics*, New Delhi: ASA; *The State As Charade,* New Delhi: ASA; *Missionaries in India,* New Delhi: ASA; *Harvesting Our Souls,* New Delhi: ASA; *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence,* New Delhi: ASA; *Arun Shourie and his Christian Critic*, Voice of India.
34.	David Frawley	*Arise Arjuna: Hinduism And The Modern World,* Voice of India.
35.	Diana L. Eck	*Banaras: City of Light,* Penguin.
36.	Marmaduke Pickthall, tr.	*The Koran,* Every Man's Library.
37.	Ibn Warraq	*Why I Am Not A Muslim,* New York: Prometheus Books.

38. Jagmohan — *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir*, Allied Publishers.

39. King James Version: — *Holy Bible*, Standard Text Edition.

40. Sir William Muir — *The Life of Mahommet: From the Original Sources*, 3rd edition, 1894, London, 1st Indian rpt, Voice of India.

41. D.S. Margoliouth — *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, 1905, London, rpt, Voice of India, 1985.

42. Martin Lings — *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, George Allen & Unwin, 1983, rpt 1986, 1988.
Chapter LXI of this book contains an account of how the throats of the seven hundred men of the Banu Qurayza tribe were cut off, and in what proportion their women and children were divided among the soldiers. The remaining women and children were bartered for warhorses and arms (pp 320). The government of Pakistan not only awarded a prize to Lings' book but selected it as the best work written in English about the Prophet in the National Seerat Conference held in Islamabad in 1983. In 1990, the University of Cairo highly commended this work. Hosni Mubarak, the former president of Egypt, honoured the author with a prize. This means Lings' work has been accepted by the Muslims themselves as definitive. I've used the copy published by The Islamic Text Society, Cambridge, UK, 1991;

43.	Sir William Muir	*Book XVII, Seige of Medina, and Massacre of the Beni Kureiza*;
44.	D.S. Margoliouth	*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, 'Publicity', Chapter IV, 'Destruction of the Jews', Chapter IX. These chapters document the root of the hatred that Muslims have towards Israel and the Jews even today; Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, Harper Perennial, pp 166–7, 175.
45.	V.S. Naipaul	*Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted peoples*, Viking.
46.	Ram Swarup	*The World as Revelation: Names of Gods*, Foreword by David Frawley, 1980; *Meditations, Yogas, Gods, Religions*;*Women in Islam*; *Whither Sikhism?*; *Hindu View of Christanity and Islam*; *Pope John Paul 11 on Eastern Religions; Yoga: A Hindu-Buddhist Rejoinder*
47.	Robert Sewell	*A Forgotton Empire (Vijaynagar)*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi–Chennai.
48.	H.D. Sharma	*The Real Tipu*, tr. Dr Pradhana Gurudutt from the original entitled *Tipu—Nija Swaroopa*, Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu, 2003. The bibliography at the end of this book is recommended reading.
49.	Sriram Sathe	*Aryans: Who Were They?* Mysore: Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti, 1971; *Bharatiya Historiography*, Hyderabad: Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti; *Facts About Aryans*, Hyderabad; *European Secularism: Mother of*

Misconceptions.

50. Vigil: A Public Opinion Forum — *Kashmir: Views by Eminent Persons*, Chennai.
51. N.R. Warad Pande — *The Nemisis of Nehru-Worship*, Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana.
52. The Holy Quran — tr. S. Abdul Gaffar into Kannada, Mangalore: Shanti Prakashan. The sura numbers vary slightly between this and the English translation of the Koran by Everyman's Library.

The following were the reference material for supporting the sadhu's exposition on the banks of the Ganga in Chapter 13 of her novella.

53. *Kashi Ka Itihaas* — Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan.
54. *Yagnavalkya Smriti* — pp. 1–343,Delhi: Nag Publishers,1985.
55. *Raghuvamsham* — pp. 4–43. Vallabhadeva's commentary on *Raghuvamsham* where he explains the concept of 'Dharmavijaya'. Vallabhadeva was a scholar of Kashmir.
56. H.D. Velankar, ed. — *Raghuvamsham*, Bombay: Nirnayasagar Press, 1948, p. 93.
57. N.S. Venakatanathacharya — *Kautilyarthashastram*, Mysore: Oriental Research Institute. Refer to Chapter 5, Section 176, Part 13, and Chapter 19, Section 7, Part 121.
58. K.S. Narayanacharya — *Relevance of Kautilya For Today*, Mysore: Kautilya Institute of National Studies.
Mr S. Gurumurthy has written a preface, which compares Greek, Christian and Islamic war ethics with

that of ancient Indian war ethics. This preface has copious amounts of scholarly evidence, which supports the conversation of the sadhu in the novella's thirteenth chapter.

59. V.S. Naipaul

'The Chachnama is Arab or Muslim genre writing, a "pleasant story of conquest", the conquest of Sindh. But it is a bloody story, and the parts that get into the school books are fairy tales…History as selective as this leads quickly to unreality. Before Mohammed, there is blackness, slavery, exploitation. After Mohammed, there is light: slavery and exploitation vanish. But did it? How can that be said or taught? What about all those slaves sent back from Sindh to the Caliph? What about the descendants of the African slaves who walk about Karachi? There is no adequate answer: so the faith begins to nullify or overlay the real world.' *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, 1981.

'Is the call for jihad against a particular people a religious right by those calling for it, or is it a human rights violation against the people on which jihad is declared and waged?' (Dr John Garang, United Nations, Geneva, 22 March 1999) Quoted in *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims*, ed. Andrew Bostom, Foreword by Ibn Warraq, New York: Promethus Books.

Lakshmi scanned the list from beginning to end, put her pen down and stared at the paper. Suddenly she picked up her pen again and began to write from memory.

> The Yogi teaches that the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge, beyond reasoning, comes to man. Metaphysical and transcendental knowledge comes to that man. This state of going beyond reason, transcending ordinary human nature, may sometimes come by chance to a man who does not understand its science; he, as it were, stumbles upon it. When he stumbles upon it, he generally interprets it as coming from outside. So this explains why an inspiration, or transcendental knowledge, may be the same in different countries, but in one country it will seem to come through an angel, and in another through a Deva, and in a third through God. What does it mean? It means that the mind brought the knowledge by its own nature, and that the finding of the knowledge was interpreted according to the belief and education of the person through whom it came. The real fact is that these various men, as it were, stumbled upon this superconscious state.
>
> The Yogi says there is a great danger in stumbling upon this state. In a good many cases there is the danger of the brain being deranged, and, as a rule, you will find that all those men, however great they were, who had stumbled upon this superconscious state without understanding it, groped in the dark, and generally had, along with their knowledge, some quaint superstition. They opened themselves to hallucinations. Mohammed claimed that the Angel Gabriel came to him in a cave one day and took him on the heavenly horse, Harak, and he visited the heavens. But with all that, Mohammed spoke some wonderful truths. If you read the Koran, you find the most wonderful truths mixed with superstitions. How will you explain it? That man was inspired, no doubt, but that inspiration was, as it were, stumbled upon. He was not a trained Yogi, and did not know the reason of what he was doing. Think of the good Mohammed did to the world, and think of the great evil that has been done through his fanaticism! Think of the millions massacred through his teachings, mothers bereft of their children, children made orphans, whole countries destroyed,

millions upon millions of people killed!

So we see this danger by studying the lives of great teachers like Mohammed and others. Yet we find, at the same time, that they were all inspired. Whenever a prophet got into the superconscious state by heightening his emotional nature, he brought away from it not only some truths, but some fanaticism also, some superstition which injured the world as much as the greatness of the teaching helped. To get any reason out of the mass of incongruity we call human life, we have to transcend our reason, but we must do it scientifically, slowly, by regular practice, and we must cast off all superstition. We must take up the study of the superconscious state just as any other science. On reason we must have to lay our foundation, we must follow reason as far as it leads, and when reason fails, reason itself will show us the way to the highest plane. When you hear a man say, 'I am inspired,' and then talk irrationally, reject it. Why? Because these three states—instinct, reason, and superconsciousness, or the unconscious, conscious, and superconscious states—belong to the same mind. There are not three minds in one man, but one state of it develops into the others. Instinct develops into reason, and reason into the transcendental consciousness; therefore, not one of the states contradicts the others. Real inspiration never contradicts reason, but fulfils it. Just as you find the great prophets saying, 'I come not to destroy but to fulfil,' so inspiration always comes to fulfil reason, and is in harmony with it. (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati Memorial Edition, 14th Edition, vol.I, 1972, pp 183–5).

She put the pen down and looked at the list: it didn't amount to even one-fourth of her research. She knew it would grow over time, as and when she recalled the names of the other books and material. It was just a question of remembering them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several people have helped in the preparatory stages of this novel. I would chiefly like to recall the assistance of a sister-novelist and her family with gratitude. For the five days that I stayed in their home, both she and her well-educated children explained the traditions, mores and manners of Muslims both in day-to-day life and on special occasions. Her husband accompanied me at all times. He took me to the mosque when it was time for namaz and introduced me to his relatives and friends, and helped me interact with them. He got me books published by the Mangalore-based Shanti Prakashana on Muslim religious traditions and rituals and explained the important ones. I shall always be grateful to him for this help. My former colleague, Dr Siddiqui, sat with me for days on end and explained the customs and manners of north Indian Muslims, especially the Muslims of Benares. Dr Ibrahim Sahib from Shimoga explained several nuances, which helped bring greater clarity to some of the mental images I had. I'm indebted to all of these people. The rest of the details in the novel are from my readings.

With respect to my specific questions and clarifications about Hampi, Dr M. Chidananda Murthy wrote back with equal specificity, along with supporting documentary evidences. I'm grateful to him for this favour. Shatavadhani Dr R. Ganesh not only dug out accurate references to specific contexts in the areas of Dharma, Indian ethics and Indian philosophical schools, but critiqued the novel's manuscript. The respected N. Balasubramanya, Dr S. Ramaswamy, B.S. Chandrashekhar and Dr Tulasiramachandra have also provided their valuable feedback and suggestions on the novel's manuscript. Dr Pradhana Gurudutt read the final manuscript, made corrections to it and critiqued it in thorough detail. Dr H.S. Gopal Rao unearthed some rare books and sent me photocopies. I can't remember the names of a host of other people whose favour I have received. It is entirely my fault for not keeping notes of the names of the people who have helped me in various capacities.

A special debt of gratitude goes out to these eminent people who read the novel thoroughly before it went to print. M. Rama Jois, retired chief justice of

the High Court of Punjab and Haryana, former governor of Jharkhand and Bihar and author of several scholarly books on law; Haranahalli Ramaswami, senior lawyer, former law minister, Gandhian and a person with a long and distinguished record of service in public life; and Ashok Haranahalli, eminent lawyer.

'Because my questions made Amir uncomfortable, he pronounced talaq just like that on the wife who had abandoned everything for him, because his religion gives him that privilege. Where do I now stand, sir? Do you have any solutions for me?'

Lakshmi, a rebellious, free-spirited and intelligent film-maker, breaks ties with her staunchly Gandhian father to marry Amir, the man she loves. She even agrees reluctantly to Amir's request that she convert to Islam, as a formality, and change her name to Razia. However, she is shocked to discover that her husband is not the open-minded, progressive individual he claimed to be. For after marriage, Amir takes his family's side in trying to force her to follow the more rigorous tenets of their faith. This sets her off on a personal journey into India's history to uncover the many layers of religion, caste and creed. Her quest leads her to the many parallels in the narratives between the past and the present and she gradually finds that though much has changed in Indian society over the centuries, much remains the same.

The second historical novel by celebrated Kannada author S.L. Bhyrappa, translated for the first time into English by Sandeep Balakrishna, *Aavarana: The Veil* raises pertinent and searching questions about religion, liberalism and identity, and highlights the importance of unshackling oneself from the bonds of false knowledge.

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